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Thesis Title:
In the Shadow of Van Diemen's Land: A Visual Investigation into Phenomenological, Ontological and Experiential Representations of Places and Their History

Abstract

This project investigates modes of representing the experience of a historically informed experience of place, through firsthand engagement with the Tasmanian Central Plateau by a subjective viewer. It explores the potential of printmaking practices of large-scale multi-plate intaglio engraving to represent this engagement, using the culturally charged symbolism of the endangered Miena Cider Gum trees of the Tasmanian Central Plateau.

The project's context lies in the expanding theoretical literature around place, the historical record of the Tasmanian Central Plateau and associated Indigenous/European history surrounding the Cider

Gum tree, *Eucalyptus gunnii,* and a local and international artistic discourse which includes the work of Mike Parr, Raymond Arnold, Michael Schlitz, and Orit Hofshi. The theoretical discussion of the project is woven through concepts expressed in the writings of, among others, Peter Hay, Simon Schama, Jeff Malpas, Maria Tumarkin, Edward Relph, Roslyn Haynes and James Boyce, along with an examination of the historical documentation of the Cider Gum tree, particularly within that of the journals of George Augustus Robinson.

The project concludes that the connection between people and place is inherently interwoven, underpinned by historical knowledge, and fundamental to cultural identity, and seeks to represent this engagement through poetic expression of a distinctly Vandiemonian subjectivity. This research has produced a body of artwork born out of subjective personal experience, expressed in a contemporary print-based installation, that makes use of the multiple and the layering possibilities of the medium to explore through elegy, analogy, and anthropomorphic form, notions of cultural and experiential saturation in place.

Contents

Chapter 1. Introduction to the Research Project: Project Parameters

The focus of this research project is on the exploration and development of a predominantly printmaking based contemporary artistic language that investigates a representation of the sensory experience gained from being in a multi-layered and complex environment. The project explores relationships between self and place, natural and cultural history, past and present, contemporary experience and understanding of *landscape*, *wilderness* and the *Tasmanian gothic*, and engages with history, time, identity, interconnectivity, ecology, geology and ambiguity through an idiosyncratic understanding of environment as an anthropomorphic and grotesque entity.

The primary research questions of the project are:

1. How can the complexity of a multi-layered experience of the environment and associated ontological considerations be represented through visual art?
2. How can the knowledge of historical narrative and its effect on ones experience be communicated through visual art?
3. How can the medium of printmaking be used as a successful and effective means of communicating the complexities of one's experience of place?

The experience of being in a place, especially that of the wilder areas of Tasmania, produces an affect that goes far beyond the purely visual, distancing view associated with conventional representations of 'landscape'. Through a prolonged engagement with place one may experience multiple fragmented viewpoints by the act of moving through the land through time, a multitude of different sounds and sensations, variations of light and weather, and be faced with a myriad of interconnected ecological, geological, historical and cultural layering simultaneously at play with one's perception of the environment and thus experience of it.

In my conception of the anthropomorphic environment, human histories of place and emotional connections with land, coupled with biological interconnectivity with the earth and co-evolution, create a reciprocal biological kinship which is perceivable in the morphic qualities of natural forms. This a biocentric view of the anthropomorphic centred upon an ecology of self and place.

While in a sense being a continuation and expansion on the traditions and discourse of 'landscape' art, this project seeks to exist as a subversion of such traditions and to explore alternative modes of environmental representation that focus on the multiplicity of lived experience. Therefore I envision this research contributing to the fields of contemporary place art, experiential installation art, and 'landscape' and 'environmental' art in general.

et iam summa procul villarum culmina fumant
maioresque cadunt altis de montibus umbrae

and now far-off smoke pearls from homestead rooftops
and from high mountains the greater shadows fall

Virgil, Eclogues, I[7]

[7] See; Virgil. *The Poems of Virgil: the Eclogues: and, the Georgics: and, the Aeneid*. U.S. : William Benton, 1952.

Damon Bird, *View from Dells Bluff*, Digital Photograph Composite, 2008.

Preface

"In the wild I lose my sense of boundaries. This is a consequence of space and solitude. The operation of space is thus the five senses stretched out from the body they inhabit, but four stretch into a vacuum. The ear cannot hear, the nose cannot smell, the tongue cannot taste, the skin cannot feel... Only the eyes have power. The eyes are free, they reach out to the horizon all around. Nothing is hidden from the eyes. As the other senses grow numb or dumb my eyes flex and extend themselves. I become a spherical reflecting eye moving through the wilderness, and ingesting it. Destroyer of the wilderness, I move through the land cutting a devouring path from horizon to horizon. There is nothing from which my eye turns, I am all that I see ... What is there that is not me? I am a transparent sac with black core full of images..."

John Coetzee, *Dusklands*[8]

Deep in the winter of 2007 I ascended the side of Dells Bluff – a rocky outcrop jutting out over the northwestern reaches of the Great Lake, on the Central Plateau of Tasmania. After some quite heavy snowfall in the preceding days, and also that morning, the task of climbing such rough and untracked terrain composed of heavy scree and scrub was fraught with peril and quite a difficult thing to undertake. Pushing through sharp and springy brush taller than my own head-height while balancing on top of a boulder covered in snow

[8] See; Coetzee, John. *Dusklands*. London : Vintage, 1998.

on one foot whilst holding a tripod in one hand, hauling a heavily laden backpack weighing on the spine, quickly became quite the feat of determination and strength of will. In a situation like this, one becomes acutely aware of the very real possibility that misbalancing or slipping could easily result in one's legs becoming twisted, broken wreckage amongst the jagged rocks below. One can only proceed with the utmost caution and respect for the type of unforgiving environment being traversed.

I found myself in this situation after having been immersed in the plateau country for around a month. Living in a Parks and Wildlife built house situated on the original site of the Liawenee Hydro Electric Commission (H.E.C.) village, beside the Liawenee Canal (long since dismantled and removed, bar one hut, to nearby Poatina for another hydroelectric scheme), and growing more or less comfortable and confident in that local environment, I did consider on more than one occasion that I might even be existing benevolently within that space with the equilibrium of the wildlife with whom I shared it on a daily basis. I didn't see many people, and I had no fear of taking to its terrain alone, or heading out in any given direction, in all kinds of weather to perambulate and explore. Yet I always did so with the complete understanding that I was alone in a wild and unforgiving environment.[9]

[9] In such a situation, feet and balance become amongst the most important aspects of one's interaction with the land, second to the eyes. I imagine that this grounding interface between the body and the land would be quite an integral thing to any bushwalker, or any human walking around in the world, but it strikes me as being interesting that in natural, uneven terrain this sensory awareness becomes magnified to such an extent. In a city environment, the ground underfoot is predominately flat and even, which allows one to take its stability for granted.

And so it was on this day as I made my way to the lower summit of the bluff, clad in a thick beany and multiple layers of warm clothing, I climbed out onto the exposed rock into the full brunt of the icy mountain winds. In the past week, the average temperature on the plateau had wavered around minus nine degrees Celsius, and the view below that I now surveyed was a frozen, ice and snow blanketed panorama of the Great Lake and its surrounding ranges. The water level of the lake was at the lowest that it had been in quite a few years, perhaps since the first 'Missionary Dam', as it was called, was constructed over the lake's southern mouth by workers of the Tasmanian Hydro Electric Commission in 1912. From my position I could gaze down at the original pre-dam shoreline and water level of the lake, stripped entirely of its original surface topsoil and vegetation, The once sandy shores were revealed now as blackened silt and mud infused banks holding remnants of waterlogged tree-stumps.

On these gravelly windswept shores I had previously spent a number of late afternoons combing the shoreline for archaeological remnants of its history, and found the surfaces to be littered with thousands of stone flakes, the fragmentary remnants of a far reaching indigenous era of the landscape. These were interspersed with the litter of more recent European interactions with the land – the discarded detritus of broken brown beer bottle glass.

From my perched outlook at the top of the bluff I could also see across to part of the northeast corner of the lake, which was once a pristine sandy beach, and the nearby eastern shores that once

provided the real estate for a local centre of Aboriginal industry.[10] The original European road too, including the remains of a stone bridge, wound its way around the north-eastern shoreline in front of me, drying in the open air after being submerged beneath the icy waters for close to a century. Below me near the dry Half Moon Bay (reverted to its previous existence as a grassland surrounding a mountain stream), in the foothills of the very hill I now crouched upon, I would later walk into the site of what appeared to have been an Aboriginal encampment, with a small arrangement of stone tools placed eerily as if having only been left there days previously.

To the southwest, my view took in the mountainous ridge that borders the north western side of the lake, running south to Split Rock, the site of an ancient Aboriginal flint quarry. While retracing Jorgen Jorgensen's surveying movements in the area, I would later discover the remains of a structure believed to be the hut that his party built on an expedition in 1826. Close to these hut remains, there also lay the ruins of a more recent European hut, comprised of a stone chimney, wooden beams and sheet iron scatter - presumably the stock hut associated with the nearby ruin of a cattle-yard; composed of stones piled up like cairns.[11]

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[10] Richard Cosgrove states that there are "21 Major sites … located on the north and north eastern shores" and that at these sites the tools represent a "woodworking technology devoted to the manufacture and maintenance of spears and waddys". Cosgrove, Richard. *Aboriginal economy and settlement in the Tasmanian Central Highlands*, Sandy Bay, Tas. : National Parks and Wildlife Service, 1984.

[11] This is a place that it would seem no one goes to now very often, aside from perhaps the wallaby hunter – a practice still allowed in the Central Plateau World Heritage area on grounds of Cultural Heritage. The plains in this area of the plateau are so overgrown with brush that they are tough to negotiate. The result of allocating this landscape as world heritage and shutting down traditional activities in the area – including and perhaps most importantly the bi-cultural practice of burning off for

Directly across the mysterious depths of Great Lake (*once thought to be* Bunyip inhabited waters[12]) obscured by Reynolds Neck and the undulating shoreline terrain, lay the southern shores of the lake. Here I saw the skeletal remains of a primary stand of a particularly unique tree - the endemic Cider Gum trees described in the journals of George Augustus Robinson, which lay scattered beside the highway in an old abandoned sheep paddock.

It is within the twisted boughs of these arboreal remains that this research project is grounded.

'green pick' - rendering parts of the plateau, in the words of Michael Cousins, the Parks and Wildlife Ranger based at Liawenee, "a fireball waiting to happen".

[12] It's been suggested that the entire Bunyip mythology originates in Australian fur seals following rivers upstream to unexpected places. In the case of the ongoing myth of the Bunyip of the Great Lake, it turned out to be the case, after one was positively identified in the lake on Friday 22nd February 1929 by Mr Critchley Parker, as reported in *The Mercury* newspaper (Hobart, Tas) on Monday 25th February 1929. - http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/24247545?searchTerm=seal+%22great+lake%22

Chapter 2. Philosophical Context: Towards a Vandiemonian Place

Before it can ever be a repose for the senses, landscape is the work of the mind. Its scenery is built up as much from the strata of memory as from layers of rock.

Simon Schama *Landscape and Memory*

In the green rolling foothills of the Great Western Tiers lies a particularly secluded rural municipality named Caveside. Situated in a fertile trough of land hidden between the Tiers, the Gog and Magog Ranges, and close to the small village of Chudleigh, Caveside is flanked by the rural municipalities of Western Creek to the east, and Mole Creek and Liena to the North and West. I grew up and spent the lion's share of my youth on one of the numerous dairy farms in the region.

The area is dominated by the grand presence of the mountains, and growing up beneath them firmly imbedded a kind of monumental significance to the great dolerite walls that separate the settled and wild worlds. Beyond this great western border of rocks was the harsh country of the highlands, existing in the imagination like another world.

As a young child growing up in the area and attending primary school in the nearby township of Mole Creek in the early 1980s, I distinctly remember a time when there was an almost daily helicopter

presence over the mountain in an effort to search for the Thylacine in the wild lands above, where it was thought the Tiger could have evaded the sight of man for all of the years that had passed since the last known representative of the species had passed away in captivity in Beaumaris Zoo in Hobart.[13] Every day on the bus ride to school, I saw the graffiti whitewashed on a quarry wall, depicting a crude Tasmanian tiger and the phrase "I've seen one!". This captured my childhood imagination and helped to form a strong sense of there being mysteries within the wild worlds above our home.

In the following years, my perception of the mountain and what it represents on an imaginary, psychological and cultural level has been transformed, as I have come to a greater understanding of the country and what its history could reveal. My knowledge of the landscape has been increasingly enriched, and I have come to recognise the invisible paths of those that have journeyed through the same land in the past, leaving traces that can be recognised and responded to.

If I look back to the time when I was a small child, I was constantly being presented with representations of environment that didn't gel with my own experience. While fascinating and valid in their own right, the landscapes and forests described pictorially and imaginatively in the books, cartoons and fairy tales of my youth were always *imported*, and never the landscape that surrounded me in the everyday world. These other worlds, represented through Disney, or Little Golden

[13] Later at Liawenee I would discover that a hut being utilized as one of the Parks and Wildlife outbuildings was the 'Tiger Hut' that was originally located deep in the Central Plateau and used by Peter Wright (owner of the Tasmanian Wildlife Park) during a major search effort for the Thylacine in 1984.

Books, told tales such as those of the Brothers Grimm, of far-off allegorical, imaginary places, where anthropomorphic wolves threaten to eat wandering German children, and the forest was a dense, perilous woodland.[14] For a long while I had no conception of ever having been in a *forest* as child, despite growing up amongst intermingled farm and bush-land on the border of the "wilderness". I don't know that I even thought that there was such a thing as traditional 'forest' in Australia. I'd been in a 'rainforest', but even that didn't seem to be anything like the standard forest of European myth and fairy tale that we had been entertained with as children. Tasmanian native forest seemed to be something altogether different, and somehow less of a *true forest*. To me what we had was *the bush* – gum trees and dry, rocky hills; something with its own uniquely distinct character.

Similarly, I grappled with the concept of "wilderness" when first encountering the word. I remember first hearing it used in association with conservation issues and it was presented as if the wilderness was hidden away like some kind of *El Dorado*. It was perplexing. I had obviously been in the bush plenty, I had climbed the mountains of the Great Western Tiers onto the plateau with my family numerous times from a young age, been to the lakes, Cradle Mountain, grown up around caves and been in them many times, I had been all around Tasmania and taken the obligatory boat trip down Macquarie Harbour

[14] In *Landscape and Memory*, Simon Schama recounts the story whereby these kinds of tales hark back to a rich Germanic mythological history, they didn't necessarily graft onto the Tasmanian landscape imaginarily in my experience – we had neither wolfs nor forests, by contrast what we seemed to have was a landscape altogether void of European mythology and deep set historical identification. So In a sense, we could only hope to create our own attachments, our own personally mythologies in place. And by virtue of that, we become embroiled in a cultural process (Schama also talks about the need for 'New Creation Myths').
Schama, Simon. *Landscape and Memory*. London : Fontana Press, 1996.

into the Gordon River, and driven to shores of Lake Pedder. Yet, when I first heard about this mysterious word *wilderness*, I was quite certain that I'd never been to it, and I wasn't sure where it was – but presumed that it existed in some other place, far away and exclusive from where people live and generally visit. It was almost as if *wilderness* were some kind of phantasmagorical enigma of the imaginary, akin to the ghost stories we exchanged in primary school about old abandoned cottages and dilapidated farm houses, and other similarly haunted structures residing in the paddocks amongst overgrown radiata pines.

And in a sense, wilderness really is a phantasmagorical term. It exists as much in the realms of marketing as it does in the recesses of isolated landscapes. By definition, it is supposed to denote places that have not 'been significantly modified by human activity', yet in the cultural history of Tasmania, there is no such place.

In Simon Schama's seminal text *Landscape and Memory*, he posits that "landscapes are culture before they are nature; constructs of the imagination projected onto wood and water and rock"[15], which is a notion embedded fundamentally within the foundations of my research. In light of humanity's interaction with the natural environment being dominated by processes of taking control of land, exploiting it, exhausting it, and displacing traditional cultures from it, Schama has highlighted Max Oelschlaeger's suggestion that what is perhaps needed now, in the grim face of the current ecological situation, where humanity and nature seem to be increasingly polarized, are new

[15] Schama, Simon. *Landscape and Memory*. London : Fontana Press, 1996, p. 61

"creation myths"[16] to "repair the damage done by our recklessly mechanical abuse of nature and to restore the balance between man and the rest of the organisms with which he shares the planet."[17] My personal conviction is that within contemporary culture, part of the function and capability of the arts lies in nurturing this kind of transformative thinking.[18]

Yet within the area that I grew up, the predominant creation myths are those from the Old World, the biblical stories that for me were never really grafted convincingly to an Australian landscape setting. The local Indigenous culture and its identification of a distinct set of unique creation myths have been by and large historically relegated to an outsider position of anthropological interest by mainstream Australian culture, rather than adopted and identified with, despite its obvious deep relevance to the unique environment. Tasmanian Aboriginal elder Jim Everett explains that:

> *"In a generalised sense traditional indigenous education is the practice of multi-interaction arrangements between human environments and natural environments. The lifestyles, roles and responsibilities of Indigenous entities – both human and non-human- are embodiments of traditional indigenous education, just as the education occurs by living the lifestyles. The cores of*

[16] Ibid. p.13.
[17] Ibid. p. 13.
[18] Indeed it is a fundamental underpinning of how I have wished the work created during this research to function – that it may inspire thinking on a deeper level on the subject matter and themes of environmental interconnectivity, and thus contribute something to the always growing and nebulous mythology of place, and how it is perceived, within the immediate context of the Tasmanian environment - but by lateral extension within a universal thematic.

> *indigenous education are the traditional knowledges which explain ecological food-chains and the protocols of respect that have existed between human and non-human entities of the earths eco-systems since the long periods of time indigenous peoples call the beginning."*[19]

According to Everett, the Tasmanian Aboriginal understanding and relationship with the land is an ideal way of living with and understanding the environment, an educational understanding and mythology "*that addresses the environmental needs of people and the natural environments that sustain us all*"[20]. Further to this he suggests that this educationally informed lifestyle is one that "*we can all aspire to if we want to*"[21]. Implicit to being a White Australian is a particular colonial historical trajectory. One is in an isolated cultural position if not able to adhere to traditional European ideological modes of thinking, nor those of the indigenous belief systems that remain by and large obscured by myth, memory, and the tragedies of Tasmania's past. There is however, a sense that one can create one's own personal mythological and historical understanding, and develop a personal sense of ontology in relation to place.[22]

When I started this research project I gave it the principal title "*In the Shadow of Van Diemen's Land*", a title borrowed from a book of poetry by Graeme Hetherington, a title that I considered to be a fitting way to illustrate the context that my research would sit within.

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[19] Everett, Jim. *Aboriginal Education and Colonialism: our Earthlinks Under Threat,* Australian Journal of Environmental Education, vol. 13, 1997.
[20] Ibid
[21] Ibid
[22] I feel that this is something that I can approach through my art making practice.

Whenever I have considered the Tasmanian landscape conceptually, it is as a *cultural landscape*, where the experience of place always occurs in light of its known history. My process of engagement has developed as my personal relationship with the land has been gradually enriched over time through a process of both an ongoing relationship with the place, and an accumulative gathering of historical information; my very understanding of how the landscape is read – how it can be valued, and what it can mean – has been broadened significantly through these processes.

In *Vandiemonian Essays*, Peter Hay speaks of the identification of being a Vandiemonian, of having descended from people who were at Port Arthur, having come from a long line of Vandiemonians, who have made home here on this island, and have in doing so, become indigenised with the place.[23] This is an idea that I identify with to a certain degree. My family tree certainly includes those that were imprisoned at Port Arthur, as it also includes those that worked the soil and built the early European structures on the land that I would later grow up on at Caveside. The specific property where this

[23] The notion of *Vandiemonialism*, as I see it, is an evolving concept as expressed by Peter Hay in his collection of essays, and further developed and echoed through James Boyce's recent re-visualising of early Tasmanian, or, *Vandiemonian* history in his book *Van Diemen's Land* - Hay and Boyce both echo the thesis of a certain negotiation and interaction with Aboriginal Tasmanians inherent in the process of setting cultural roots and creating and relating to new homelands as essentially being an 'indigenising' process, and it would seem by virtue of this altered context of the original word that both Hay and Boyce have opted for a distinct spelling of what is a variation of the term "Vandemonian". In the new spelling, the 'demon' has been dropped, and the word takes on a greater contemporary meaning than simply being a defunct descriptor for an inhabitant of Van Diemen's Land. It is for these reasons that I have opted for the contemporary spelling of the word as used by Hay and Boyce throughout this writing.
Hay, Peter. *Vandiemonian Essays*. North Hobart, Tas. : Walleah Press, 2002.
Boyce, James. *Van Diemen's Land*. Melbourne, Vic. : Black Inc., 2008.

occurred was Wesley Dale, which is situated upon the same area once known as 'Native Hut Corner', and which, as the name suggests, was in the pre-colonial period the location of a semi-permanent Aboriginal village of sorts.[24] It is a strange and uneasy lingering feeling that arises from meditating on the implications of just how it has come to be that somebody else's home has been erased and usurped – disassociated; and like a new skin grafted onto old flesh, has grown and been implanted with new stories, woven with new lives, and new experiences.

But of course one can never really bury the past, and while nobody within living memory can now recall the days of warfare, or the days of the convict system, it remains no more than a generation or two in the past.[25] The lowland plains now cloaked with the benevolent grazing of a sheep dappled pasture remain the hidden killing fields of a bygone era; concealed beneath them is a subsoil fertilized with the blood of the original occupants of the land – complete with a topsoil

[24] Native Hut Corner appears to have been a name existing as an unofficial vernacular of place names marking the site of the Aboriginal village (close by to *Toolumbunner*, an important ochre mine) it described prior to the specific area being granted to an ex-mariner by the name of John Vaughan (under that same title). Vaughan's grant was later sold to Henry Reed who changed the name to Wesley Dale. The property took up a large area in the vicinity just west of what is now the township of Chudleigh. In *Contested Places*, Shayne Breen suggests that Native Hut Corner consisted of a semi-permanent village of bark huts frequented by the *Pallittorre people.* Breen, Shayne. *Contested Places: Tasmania's northern districts from ancient times to 1900*. Hobart, Tas. : Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies, 2001. p. 19.

[25] A recent ABC Local Radio segment on Tasmanian place names and their origins included an elderly gentleman calling up who made comment in regard to the troubles with the Big River Tribe, who commented "*I wasn't there at the time, but me grandfather was*". http://blogs.abc.net.au/files/tasmanian-placenames-october-15-2011.mp3

sprinkling of the sweat and bile of convict labour.[26] My ancestors were builders in the employ of Henry Reed at Wesley Dale, who were likely involved with its high wall constructed as protection from Pallittorre attack, along with the other structures of the estate. At the edge of the colonial frontier of the time, they lived within a community that partook in the horrific vengeful lynching of the local Aboriginal tribes. As it was reported in the Colonial Times on the 6th of July 1827;

> *"The people over the second Western Tier have killed an immense quantity of the blacks this last week, in consequence of their having murdered Mr Simpson's stock-keeper. They were surrounded whilst sitting round their fires, when the soldiers and others fired at them when about thirty yards distant. They report there must be about sixty of them killed and wounded."*[27]

My ancestors' feelings about or participation in such events remains unknown, but I certainly like to imagine that they were not among the perpetrators of these killings, allegedly conducted as retribution for the tribe's killing of a stock-keeper named William Knight who himself was described by one of his contemporaries as someone who "*used to kill the natives for sport*".[28] I can only hope that my distant family were amongst those who consistently had friendly dealings with the Pallittorre, and did not share the mindset of those at the time who

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[26] "*The Westward's killing fields, late 1820's*", map covering the area of the Mersey and Meander valleys – once known as the Western Marshes, Breen, *Contested Places*, p. 26

[27] *Colonial Times*, 6th July 1827, as referenced in *Contested Places* by Shayne Breen: Breen, Shayne. *Contested Places: Tasmania's northern districts from ancient times to 1900*. Hobart, Tas. : Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies, 2001. p. 27.

[28] The words of Punch, another stock-keeper in the area who spoke to G A Robinson. Ibid. p. 27.

believed the original people of this land were "*Ourang Outangs, disgrace would it be to the human race to call them men*".[29] I can at least hold onto the local folkloric pub tale that the local Aboriginals used to visit the old cottage on our family farm, and be given food and other items in numerous friendly exchanges on the front porch.

If there has indeed been a marked indigenising of people with place in Tasmania, it has certainly been a relationship marked by a certain level of ambiguity between the European immigrants and the indigenous flora, fauna, and people[30]. Perhaps scarred by the brutal and bloody excesses of colonialism, Van Diemen's Land society, which actively tried to make a fresh start, as criminals do, by changing its name in an effort to shed the horrific associations of its demonic title, has never really seemed to properly come to terms with its past. On this very subject Peter Hay has noted that in Tasmania:

> *"past has the stature of a dark family secret – quite literally a dark family secret – the half brother bogeyman boarded up out of sight in the attic. He/it is shame for our bastard birth as a prison for the unwanted dregs of the British slums and our subsequent legacy of depravity hard upon vileness, brutality fast upon atrocity. He/it is institutionalized sodomist rape, its echoes clearly audible in the hysteria that surrounded the 1990s debate about the legal status of sodomy. He/it is the unbearable legacy of brutal dispossession and the near-complete genocide of those*

[29] Jetson, Tim. *The Roof of Tasmania: a history of the Central Plateau*. Launceston, Tas : Pelion Press, 1989. p. 30
[30] See: Breen, Shayne. *Contested Places: Tasmania's northern districts from ancient times to 1900*. Hobart, Tas. : Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies, 2001

whose land this was. He/it is a weight of guilt that could not be borne."[31]

Indeed, it would seem that in the very act of eliciting a name change for this island lies an inherent denial of all things past associated with the previous name of 'Van Diemen's Land'. One has to wonder about what this name change means for the collective psyche of the Tasmanian people, who, generation upon subsequent generation, have by and large left the past buried and un-reconciled. Contemporary Tasmania likes to promote itself as a 'clean green' island paradise, with abundant agricultural and wilderness virtues for the tourist to behold, which has always seemed to me like a strange contradiction to the image that emerges of the place through the annals of its history. But in truth, the history of 'Tasmania' only really begins in 1856 when the name was implemented, a time when the bloody Black War was past, as was the Bushranging epidemic, while the Transportation system was on its last legs. And so in the Tasmanian psyche a history beyond that exists mostly in the mythologized version bought and sold in the realm of tourism, while as Hay so aptly put it, a "*black hole of unfaced guilt and shame remains firmly embedded in the dark recesses of the collective Tasmanian psyche.*"[32]

Yet it was in a kind of tourism centre when in my early twenties I stumbled upon Graeme Hetherington's book at a stall in the midst of the Salamanca Market, and it has since become one of the most weather-beaten, dog-eared and treasured books that I own. It was a

[31] Hay, Peter. *Vandiemonian Essays*. North Hobart, Tas. : Walleah Press, 2002. p. 29
[32] Ibid. p. 31

revelation to me then, as it remains to me now - this text has helped instil in me a belief that it is both possible, and a worthy endeavour to tackle the subject of Tasmania's brutal and ugly past in and of its own terms – to in a sense, try to *exorcise it* through art, by confronting the subcutaneous guilt, violence and grotesquery.

Hetherington's jarring and confronting words have become seared to my memory:

Flesh-tearing prongs, tense crippled shapes,
Late autumn apple orchards bear
Dark witness to the island's past.
Engorged, harsh ravens stiffly perched
On crowning branches fiercely jab

Christ crucified in every tree
And make of them a coat of arms.
Bad fruit and crazy, rotten-drunk
Convict-striped wasps continue to
Convey the knowledge I acquired.

Still water for a time became
A gallery with replicas
Of nature primitive and raw:
The sundered, blood-scabbed eucalypts

Like Trees of Man in glossy mags,
While knotted, clumpy, mist-patched hills

And fire-blacked rotting logs with huge
White witchetties were images

Of steaming beasts and stinking whales,
Club-dented seals and abos dead
From ulcerated gunshot wounds
Washed out in a hazy blur,

A scrub-scarred cliff face slashed by sun
Glazed bare and characterless as
A sand dune surface before passed
As fit for young Tasmanian eyes

Already clouded with the lie.
I stoned the pool, rescued the past,
Permitting just the landscape's scowl
As mirror for a convict's soul.[33]

When I first encountered this poetry, I was struck by how rooted it was in sense of *Tasmanianism*. It was probably the first time I had encountered art that was so vehemently about place, and quite specifically Tasmanian – its landscapes, symbolism, the people and their attitudes. The use of the word 'abo' in the poem 'Port Arthur' is jarring and violent, but is instantly reflective of generations of ingrained Tasmanian racism, rather than in itself being racist – it holds

[33] Excerpt from *Port Arthur*, a poem by Graeme Hetherington.
Hetherington, Graeme. *In the Shadow of Van Diemen's Land*. Cornford Press. 1999.

a mirror to local culture, and the ugliness lurking just below its surface veneer.

Deeply embedded, in fact, fundamental to this research project is a sense of place. The work is grounded in the experiential perspective of someone who has come to an idiosyncratic understanding of specific Tasmanian environments, locations – places, through a lifelong journey complete with overlaying generational ties. I am of the place, and it is in the context of exploring one's home ground that this work operates. As Peter Hay quotes in his 1993 essay *Subversive History: A Plea for the Primacy of 'Home'*, Martin Heidegger once said that home is "*an overwhelming inexchangeable something to which we are subordinate*"[34], in the same essay Hay also points to Edward Relph's assertion that home is "*the foundation of our identity as individuals and as members of a community*" and "*an irreplaceable centre of significance*".[35] These assertions can certainly be applied to the grounding of this project, which itself stems from the primacy of the phenomenological encounter of place.[36]

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[34] Hay, Peter. *Vandiemonian Essays*. North Hobart, Tas. : Walleah Press, 2002. p. 7.
[35] Ibid. p.7.
[36] The nerve centre of my research is not unlike the disembodied eye described by John Coetzee in *Dusklands* (quoted earlier in this text) - levitating across the Plateau interpreting the meaning of the base phenomenological encounter within the context of a specific place. Although I have long been fond of the Heidegarian notion of *Dasein* – or more loosely the notion that the artistic discourse that I undertake is akin to a philosophical enquiry into what can be gleaned from the simple act of being in the world, it is perhaps more through an idiosyncratic interpretation of phenomenological encounter that my examination of the lateral meanings and symbologies of my experiences have arisen. In many ways the kind of historical understanding of Phenomenology championed by such luminaries as Martin Heidegger, Edmund Husserl, Emmanuel Kant and Maurice Merleau-Ponty - which were key interests when this research began - have given way to the more specific and localised area of philosophical inquiry revolving around place and cultural history being discussed in this chapter.

Inseparable from the experience and sense of place is the associated sense of a deeply layered cultural and environmental history – to the degree that my research has largely been driven by a questioning of the degree to which I can understand and respond to the notion of *heritage* (both Aboriginal and European) within the landscape; through my art practice. Peter Hay has described the meaning and value of heritage as simply "*that which, inherited from the past, gives meaning to the present*"[37], he has stated that it (heritage) "*provides this day with a context in history. It situates the present on a past-present-future continuum and supplies it with identity. The notion of 'heritage' has, if anything, become too 'venerable'. It is really a much less encumbered, more humble concept. It is to do with those aspects of the lived-in environment whereby we construct for ourselves a sense of home."*[38] Simon Schama suggests that enrichment for contemporary society can be found in the past and its forgotten memories:

> *"though it may sometimes seem that our impatient appetite for produce has ground the earth to thin and shifting dust, we need only poke below the subsoil of its surface to discover an obstinately rich loam of memory. It is not that we are any more virtuous or wiser than the most pessimistic environmentalist supposes. It is just that we are more retentive. The sum of our pasts, generation laid over generation, like the slow mould of the seasons, forms the compost of our future. We live off it."*[39]

[37] Ibid. p. 5.
[38] Ibid. p.5.
[39] Schama, Simon. *Landscape and Memory*. London : Fontana Press, 1996. p. 574.

In this contemporary experience of landscapes within their historical context, of a landscape as home, place is essentially that which clearly contributes significantly to shaping and development of a sense of self, and a sense of identity. Essentially a reciprocal engagement can be seen to exist, whereby we as individuals become enmeshed within the places in which we live, are weathered and shaped by their moods and atmosphere, their palette of colours, and unique flora and fauna - all combining to shape the perception of the familiar and the homely. While we also actively engage, whether directly or indirectly, in both physically and perceptually shaping these same environmental surrounds.

Jeff Malpas in his seminal work *Place and Experience, a Philosophical Topography* posits that the significance of place is to be found in the grounding of our experience within it, and that this derives from the nature of human thought, experience and identity established through place. Shayne Breen, when speaking of Malpas in the introduction of his work *Contested Places,* described the former as someone who posits Heidegger's argument that "*place is integral to the structure and possibility of human experience. All creatures according to Malpas, are embedded in a world; this embeddedness, not some response, either objective or affective, to some spatio-temporal location, is place. Place is not merely an objective idea (for example, a simple location) or a subjective experience, but an expression 'of being-in which involves oriented, bounded location'. This concept of place as a condition of embeddedness involving both people and a world directly challenges the tendency of western culture to see the human and natural worlds*

as inherently distinct."[40] So it can come to be understood, that self and place are inextricably woven together in a type of hybrid physical, imaginative, and psychological ecology – which is exactly the aesthetic terrain that this research explores.

If to be human, as Edward Relph suggests, "*is to live in a world that is filled with significant places; to be human is to have and know your place*"[41], then it is perhaps quite natural that my place of exploration has landed me squarely in the Great Western Tiers region in the heart of Tasmania, where I grew up, and developed my own sense of place and home. This is an area where archaeological exploration first finds evidence of human occupation some 35,000 years before present.[42], and where from at least 4,500 years ago (following the preceding ebbs and flows of glaciation and global climate fluctuations during the previous 30,500 years) symbiotic and homeostatic ecological relationships developed between people and the natural environment. Marked by environmentally altering practices such as firestick farming and midden building, the island's indigenous people had historically existed within a culture that was quite literally embedded, and indistinct from, the environment and its natural systems. [43]

During glaciation some 18,000 years ago, the land south of the Great Western Tiers was dominated by glaciers, and indigenous people

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[40] Breen, Shayne. *Contested Places: Tasmania's northern districts from ancient times to 1900*. Hobart, Tas. : Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies, 2001. p.4
[41] Relph, Edward. *Place and Placelessness*, London : Pion 1976. p. 1.
[42] The oldest archaeological evidence of human occupation in Tasmania dates at about 35,000 years ago; at Parempar Meethaner rock shelter, in the Forth River Valley. See Shayne Breen, *Contested Places*.
Breen, Shayne. *Contested Places: Tasmania's northern districts from ancient times to 1900*. Hobart, Tas. : Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies, 2001. p.15.
[43] Ibid. p. 15

lived amongst the alpine shrubs and grasslands on the central highlands, adapted to these conditions, living almost exclusively on red-necked wallabies[44], In the last the 4,500 years, the island is understood to have come into the current climatic conditions during which had developed the widespread firing practices of the indigenous peoples, that have significantly shaped the ecological terrain and its appearance. European people came into the picture some 188 years BP[45]: a number far dwarfed by the sheer magnitude of the years of indigenous heritage in the land.

But it is within that relatively small time frame that our European layering of cultural history exists within memory, written word, and the marks and transformations inflicted upon the landscape itself. These markers of history and heritage can be both tangible and intangible. For the European colonial trajectory, it may be much easier to identify specific artefacts of heritage within the landscape. For the indigenous history, this may at first seem to be something altogether missing from plain view, but if we look closely, it becomes clear that the markers of indigenous cultural history are deeply embedded within the landscape, and are all around us. In this regard, there is a deep sense of absence and loss pervading much of the Tasmanian landscape which has formed a large part of the experience of place that I wish to convey through my work.

Growing up at Caveside, I always had a tendency to wander up through the bush-covered limestone outcrops behind the farmhouse,

[44] Ibid. p. 15
[45] BP stands for Before Present. Also see;
Cosgrove, Richard. *Aboriginal economy and settlement in the Tasmanian Central Highlands*. Sandy Bay, Tas. : National Parks and Wildlife Service, 1984.

which in the context of the farm, were the areas where the indigenous flora was most left intact, due to the terrain's unsuitability for agricultural development. From these hills one has a good view out over the valley and of the 'great wall' of the Western Tiers. I have a pervasive memory of a darkness to the landscape; I always felt that there was a certain hauntedness to the place – some kind of void under the surface. A lost history, perhaps even the grotesque secrets of the half-brother brute living concealed under the floorboards of neat colonial architecture.

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As places where land is inscribed with meaning and significance through the process of lived experience and cumulative engagement through time, homelands are invaluable bases for the psyche. They are at once refuges and places where real lives and stories are interwoven with myth and history, and the existential processes of birth, death and resurrection (through rebirth) are played out. This way of looking at the physical and psychological terrain forms the subject of my inquiry. The landscapes that I examine (and they are landscapes, rather than natural environments), are viewed within the context of their history, and are thus cultural landscapes; they are not quite wilderness areas or places of purely wild nature, despite their current legal definitions, in such places as the Tasmanian Central Plateau.

Henry David Thoreau once said that "*in Wildness is the preservation of the World*",[46] a quotation that has become something of a catch phrase for the environmental movement and its push for the conservation and preservation of the world's wild places. In Tasmania, there is a particularly rich history of the emergence of conservation ideology and the politics of the green movement, from the campaigns to save Lake Pedder and the Franklin River (in the 1960s, 70s and 80s), through to the more recent contestation regarding the construction of a pulp mill in the Tamar Valley. The environment and how it is treated has become a polarising issue within the Tasmanian community – even to the extent where the controversy over differing ideologies inherent in these issues have been termed wilderness 'battles' or 'wars'.[47] Thoreau wrote those words while living humbly on the outskirts of a town, near second-generation forest, ostensibly endeavouring to live a life in harmony with nature consisting of simple cultivation, self-sufficiency and animal husbandry. Essentially, he was a farmer.

The Oxford English Dictionary lists the term Wilderness as "an uncultivated, uninhabited, and inhospitable region", "a neglected or abandoned area", or "a position of disfavour, especially in a political context."[48] In terms of its etymology, the word derives from the Old English word *wildeornes,* meaning, "land inhabited only by wild animals". Meanings change with time, and now the WILD Foundation sets out two main criteria for what may be deemed wilderness: (1) "a place that is mostly *biologically intact*"; and (2) "a place that is *legally*

[46] Thoreau, Henry David. *Walking*. Cambridge, MA : Riverside Press, 1914. p. 46.
[47] See; Buckman, Greg. *Tasmania's Wilderness Battles*. Crows Nest, N.S.W. ; Allen & Unwin, 2008.
[48] *The Oxford English Dictionary online*. Oxford : Oxford University Press, 2000.

protected so that it remains wild, and free of industrial infrastructure, and open to traditional indigenous use, or low impact recreation."[49] Notable in the contemporary understanding of wilderness is the support and inclusion of indigenous heritage. The Wilderness Society clearly states that it "supports indigenous people's land and sea rights, and is committed to proper and detailed consultation with affected indigenous people before and during campaigns to protect wilderness and biological diversity".[50]

Despite this, the nomenclature of 'wilderness', is invariably both ambiguous and bound by a certain sense of exclusivity, and its parameters are simply not sufficient for properly describing the vast majority of landscapes contained within the Island of Tasmania, certainly not within a deeper sense of the indigenous historical context. For if we apply the original definition of wilderness, we find ourselves with the traditional understanding that before European people first set foot on the Island, it was in a state of wilderness; which is a blatant denial of its indigenous heritage and inherent ecological and cultural cultivation.

Rather than adhere to the notion of wilderness when considering the Tasmanian Central Plateau, I have found it more appropriate to consider the environment as a cultural landscape. My personal understanding is steeped in view of the place where human history, both personal, cultural and social, and its associated engagement,

[49] The Wild Foundation website, accessed 17th November, 2012, http://www.wild.org/main/how-wild-works/policy-research/what-is-a-wilderness-area/

[50] Wilderness Society website, accessed 17th November, 2012, http://www.wilderness.org.au/about-us/who-is-the-wilderness-society

interaction, and alteration of the physical environment is woven in a tapestry of place, time and experience. Yet it is within the terminology and ideology of wilderness values that the Tasmanian Parks and Wildlife Service would begin to take over custodianship of large portions of the Central Plateau in 1981[51], and one could argue that this legal status as Wilderness has been responsible for a subsequent cordoning off and denial of a certain layer of cultural history, in some instances instigating policy that has seen Parks and Wildlife management actively seeking to remove the physical traces of previous traditional European usage.[52]

It is somewhat ironic then, that the term "cultural landscape" has predominantly developed for usage within the context of landscape heritage and protective legislation in regards to it. In light of indigenous cultural history in the landscape of Tasmania, virtually all landscapes here could well be deemed cultural landscapes by default. In Australia, we have only one World Heritage Area listed and protected under the properties of a cultural landscape: the Uluru-Kata Tjuta National Park, home to one of the most recognizable and iconic landscape features in Australia: Uluru. In contrast to wilderness, Ken Taylor offered this explanation of cultural landscape:

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[51] See; Jetson, Tim. The roof of Tasmania: a history of the Central Plateau. Launceston, Tas : Pelion Press, 1989. p. 153.

[52] This includes Parks and Wildlife Service removal of hut structures, severe constriction of traditional land usage practices, and limited horse, vehicle, and dog access. I have personally observed sites where hut structures have been removed and spoken to the local ranger about it after investigating the locations of structures detailed in a report by David Collett. See; Collett, David. *Inventory of European historic structures on Tasmania's Central Plateau (Phase III of the World Heritage Area Historic Structures Inventory Project) / a report to the Parks and Wildlife Service by David Collett.* Hobart, Tas : Parks and Wildlife Service, 1995.

We are surrounded by the landscapes that people have settled, modified, or altered over time. These landscapes are cultural landscapes, the everyday landscapes which surround us and in which we conduct our activities. They are the result of human intervention in the natural landscape and present a record of human activity, human values and ideologies. In this way they do not simply represent physical changes brought about by human intervention. They also represent evidence of material culture manifested in the landscape and thereby reflect human relationships with our surrounds. They are an inextricable and coherent part of our intellectual and cultural background.

Cultural landscapes are literally an imprint of human history. They can tell us, if we care to read and interpret them, something about the achievements and values of our predecessors. In this way cultural landscapes are symbols of who we are and can serve to remind us of the past. Because they are a record of past and present actions, cultural landscapes are a product of change. They embody physical changes which in turn reflect evolving attitudes towards the landscape. It is important that we learn to interpret cultural landscapes as living history and as part of our national identity. They contain a wealth of evidence of our social and material history with which we readily associate heritage values.

This idea of the cultural landscape stems from the notion that landscapes are inherently cultural constructs, where landscape "is never simply a natural space, a feature of the natural environment. Every landscape is the place where we establish our own human organization of space and time".[53] The term has its literal origin in the German word *Kulturlandschaft,* which like the origins of the word landscape itself – *landscaef* - comes from the Anglo-German language dating from 500AD (or 1510 BP), whereby the original meaning of landscape was *"a clearing in the forest with animals, huts, fields, fences. It was essentially a peasant landscape carved out of the original forest or weald, i.e. out of the wilderness. So landscape from the beginning has meant a man-made artefact."*[54] Essentially the term can be seen as complementary and an extension of the Heideggarian philosophy of place championed by such academics as Jeff Malpas; where the landscape is both *humanised and humanising*, and whereby it can be understood, as David Lowenthal put it, that "it is landscape as a whole – that largely manmade tapestry, in which all other artefacts are embedded … which gives them their sense of place".[55]

Cultural landscapes such as the Cider Gum sites near Miena at the centre of this research can be understood as artefacts in and of

[53] Jackson, John Brinckerhoff. *Discovering the Vernacular Landscape*. New Haven : Yale University Press, 1984. p.156.
[54] Taylor, Ken. *Cultural Landscapes: a Bridge Between Culture and Nature*. Paper presented at the Penang Institute on 26th June, 2010. Accessed 17th November, 2012, http://penanginstitute.org/v3/files/Penang_Cult_Lsc_Public_lecture.pdf
[55] Lowenthal, David, introduction *to Our Past Before Us: Why Do We Save It?* Lowenthal and Binney. London : Temple Smith, 1981

themselves[56]. Such cultural artefacts consist of traditional archaeological objects, as well as the traces or markers inherent in the substance of the organic and geological environment, such as is the case with Uluru – where the very notion of culture embedded in both geology and place is inherent in the concept of the 'sacred site' - the landscape is a living entity, that holds within it a record of cultural and social history – and thus exists at the perceptual interface between the natural and the cultural; between visible and invisible layers of meaning.

In this less visibly tangible sense, we can understand indigenous cultural heritage and connection with place as being something inseparable and completely housed within the landscape – where spirituality and ideological belief systems intertwine with the actual landforms and particular plants, animals and places. In Anglo-European terms, the land itself can be seen as a manifestation of religious sanctity and expression. The forms of nature assume the role of built structures such as ancient cathedrals, or the monolithic stones of Stonehenge, but different in that these landscapes are not entirely built by human physical effort, but are also constucted imaginatively through cultural embeddedness and social ingraining. As explained by Shayne Breen:

> *"Australian Aborigines variously refer to the places they inhabit as country, land, territory, or as the Aboriginal writer Ruby Langford put it, 'belongin place'. Belonging places, prior to*

[56] The sites that I refer to here, will be detailed in the following chapter – by and large I refer to specific areas of ancient Aboriginal occupation with and a protracted cultural entwinement with this particular endemic Eucalypt, the Cider Gum, on Tasmania's Central Plateau.

British invasion, were sites and tracts of land to which groups and group members had custodial rights and obligations. Each group bore a custodial responsibility to live on and manage a clearly defined home estate. This included the performance of ceremonies which maintained the integrity of the land's spirit guardians. The proper discharge of responsibilities to ones belongin place was believed to guarantee human well-being."[57]

Of particular interest to my research is where such an engagement with place can be seen to merge anthropomorphically with the physical features of that environment:

"*Belongin places were and remain the product of relations between nature and human culture. The land was commonly conceived in spiritual terms. Both the land and human society were subject to the spiritual authority of mythical beings. As the late Australian Aboriginal poet Kevin Gilbert once put it, the pre-British Aborigine was 'drunk on religion, intoxicated by the metaphysics expressed through the physical features of his land'. The country was populated by ancestral beings which made the land and the people, created a moral order, and provided the food and water necessary to human life. Features of the land, such as rivers and mountains, and also the stars, were created by ancestors who, their acts of creation complete, came to reside in the physical features of the country."*[58]

[57] Breen, Shayne. *Contested Places: Tasmania's northern districts from ancient times to 1900*. Hobart, Tas. : Centre for Tasmanian Historical Studies, 2001. p. 16
[58] Ibid. p. 16.

Eerily reminiscent of these notions, I have found the bodily boughs of trees in the mountain country to bear such anthropomorphic resemblances that would seem to echo such cultural embeddedness in the physical forms of the environment. On the Central Plateau, local historian Tim Jetson crudely termed this kind of spiritual belief ingrained in country *Primitive Animism*, the details of which remain largely mysterious, though trees on the plateau were used ceremonially for the entombment of dead bodies by the indigenous inhabitants, and it was also believed that yelling or waving a flaming torch at the wind could force its retreat.[59]

It is with a sense of this saturation of meaning and significance hidden within the forms of the landscape - a network of interwoven stories obscured by a fractured history, that I have endeavoured to come to some kind of reading of the strangely anthropomorphic formations of the dead Cider Gum trees as being almost akin to a monolithic totem that has soaked up the secrets of the cultural landscape that it has been entwined with throughout time. I have endeavoured to represent it as a significant marker of place, full of the absorbed anthropomorphic resonances of placial engagement – soaked with Vandiemonian tragedy and turmoil, with primordial mystery, an indigenous significance by and large lost to the ages - while at the same time being imbued with a sense of intimacy that I see at the heart of a deep engagement with a place over a long period of time.

[59] See; Jetson, Tim. The Roof of Tasmania: a history of the Central Plateau. Launceston, Tas : Pelion Press, 1989. pp. 6-7.

Chapter 3. Historical Context: The Melliferous Cider Tree

"Southern trees bear strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root"[60]

Endemic to Tasmania, the Miena Cider Gum, or *Eucalyptus gunnii,* is a small to medium sized woodland tree that often grows in *frost-hollows* – pocketed interface areas between open grassland and woodlands in and around the Great Lake region of the Tasmanian Central Plateau.[61] The species is essentially known by a "40 by 40 kilometre area covering from west of Miena to Interlaken"[62]. Groupings of the tree are usually small and scattered, but there have in the past been some areas of greater concentration verging on small forests, or stands, near the present day Shannon Lagoon, St. Patricks Plains, The Skittleballs, and around Arthurs Lake - however most of these larger

[60] Excerpt from *Strange Fruit*, a poem by Abel Meeropol, made famous as an iconic song by Billie Holiday. A "haunting protest against the inhumanity of racism" to quote Elizabeth Blair; Blair, Elizabeth. *The Strange Story Of The Man Behind Strange Fruit*. NPR Music website, accessed November 17th, 2012, http://www.npr.org/2012/09/05/158933012/the-strange-story-of-the-man-behind-strange-fruit

[61] Analogous to the some 232 Aboriginal archaeological sites located around the Great Lake, with campsites predominantly located on the interface zones between woodland and wetland. See;
Cosgrove, Richard. *Aboriginal economy and settlement in the Tasmanian Central Highlands*. Sandy Bay, Tas.: National Parks and Wildlife Service, 1984.

[62] Australian Government website for the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, *Australian Threatened Species: Miena Cider Gum Eucalyptus gunnii ssp*. divaricate, PDF, accessed November 17th, 2012, http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/pubs/tsd06miena-cider-gum.pdf

stands are now gone due to either drowning with the raising of lake levels through damming, or the prolonged pressure of grazing.[63]

The species has fallen into an increasingly rapid decline, verging on critical in the last 20-30 years, and is now listed as endangered under the both the national Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act of 1999, and the Tasmanian Threatened Species Protection Act of 1995. It is thought that a combination of European agricultural practice (i.e. grazing and burning) and global warming are the root causes of the trees seemingly sudden sickness. Studies have shown a minor shift in the average temperature of the Plateau over the last 20 years, and drought possibly connected with climate change has taken a toll on the general area.[64] As one of the most frost tolerant of all Eucalypts, it is highly fire intolerant, and because of the nature of its sap and foliage being so sweet it is also susceptible to being over eaten by animals.

The relationship between this tree and the species that graze its leaves is an important one, and during the recent history of the Central Plateau there have been some major fluctuations in the

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[63] Michael Pemberton in a 1986 report stated that:
"*A combination of extensive grazing and burning over approximately 150 years has resulted in the development of the most widespread and sever sheep erosion in Tasmania. This is most noticeable above 1000 metres. In many areas these land practices have reduced vegetation cover allowing the erosive forces of frost, wind and water to remove large quantities of topsoil."*
Pemberton, Michael. *Land Systems of Tasmania Region 5. Central Plateau*. Hobart, Tas. : Department of Agriculture,1986.p. 40.

[64] Australian Government website for the Department of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities, *Australian Threatened Species: Miena Cider Gum Eucalyptus gunnii ssp*. divaricate, PDF, accessed November 17th, 2012, http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/publications/pubs/tsd06miena-cider-gum.pdf

populations of such native and introduced species, linked to human interaction, including the brush-tail possum (T. Vulpecula). For thousands of years human beings have been the main predator of this species, which was continually practiced through the early Vandiemonian traditions on the Plateau, up until 1984. They were hunted as a key food resource by the *Lairremmener* (original indigenous Tasmanians of that region) up until their removal from the Plateau in December of 1831, plausibly leading to an unhindered possum population explosion on the Plateau.

Certainly when one considers the sheer number of animals killed in later years on the Plateau over a prolonged period through snaring and trapping to feed the fur industry, there appears to have been vast amounts of the species available to exploit. In the height of the fur industry boom of 1979 alone, 296,000 possum skins (at a profit of $2,500,000 to the hunters) are recorded as being taken from the Plateau.[65] Yet by 1984 the whims of European fashion industry, so far removed from the isolated highlands, had led to a lack of demand deeming the local fur industry moribund, and ultimately, legislation was implemented that year under the influence of the rising conservation movement to permanently ban the snaring and trapping of game on the Plateau.

[65] These statistics come from Tim Jetson in The Roof of Tasmania. Jetson also states that over "the 32 year period between 1923 and 1955 … 634,600 brush-tail possum skins" were collected. Skins of the ring-tail possum during the same period totalled "8,110,410 skins, forty percent of which were from the Central Plateau".
Jetson, Tim. The Roof of Tasmania: a history of the Central Plateau. Launceston, Tas : Pelion Press, 1989. p.154.

But there are many contributing factors to the Cider Gums decline, and when I questioned botanist and author Jen Sanger, who has studied the trees extensively, she explained the situation of the Cider Gums in fairly bleak terms. *"[The Miena Cider Gum], is one species on a large list of rare and threatened plants and animals that are probably not going to survive what scientists are referring to as the '6th global species extinction'"*[66] This particular wave of mass extinction, Sanger explained, is entirely man-made which differentiates it from the kinds of mass extinctions seen in the past, caused by such things as meteorites and ice ages.

> "*Changing the environment is what us humans seem to do best, not only are we changing the climate, but we are also rapidly changing habitats- forest are converted into farmlands, rivers into dams. Habitats are also becoming fragmented by roads and housing developments, preventing species from freely dispersing and moving across the landscape like they once did.*
>
> *And that's what's happening to the Miena Cider Gum. A lot has been published about the effects of drought and reduced rainfall on the species, which I'm sure hasn't helped its current situation, but I feel the main culprit to its decline has been habitat destruction and the grazing of the midlands for the past 150 years.*
>
> *Sheep have an incredible impact on the landscape. Not only do*

[66] Sanger, Jen. Email message to the author, September 11th 2012.

they degrade the soil and alter the nutrient balance of the soil, but they will also eat any seedling in sight, and that's where the problem lies, since there have been no seedlings to replace the aging trees, as these areas have been grazed for the last 150 years. So aged trees have started to die off in the last few decades (not helped by the drying climate) leading to the dieback that we see.

As for the future of the species, it has gotten to the point where no viable seed [is] left. Hardly any of the adult trees are producing seed and the seed that is left is of poor quality genetically speaking. There has been a lot of effort by the government to do replanting, but many of these have been unsuccessful and have died. Unfortunately the future is looking pretty grim for the Miena Cider Gum."[67]

...

James Boyce, in his recent history of Van Diemen's Land, described the peculiar phenomenon of the mass dying-off of native trees that occurred all over the island after the native populations were removed to Flinders Island – as though the removal of the people from the ecological system that they were a part of, lead to a fatal imbalance to some species (it's heartbreaking to imagine that as the clan-folk sat on the shores of a foreign Island, facing their homeland over the Bass

[67] Sanger, Jen. Email message to the author, September 11th 2012.

Strait waters and dying of homesickness, the trees of their homeland reciprocated in turn).[68]

When I began my search for these trees, I had never actually encountered one outside of a book, and so had no specific experience of the real life tree, and how to identify it. My introduction to them came through the historiographical texts of Tasmania's colonial past, through the works of the older writers such as Henry Melville, James Bonwick, James Erskine Calder and Henry Ling Roth, along with the more contemporary works of Lyndall Ryan and Henry Reynolds. These historians have detailed the past life of the Island, shedding light on the days when it was known under the name of *Van Diemen's Land*, and they have provided valuable insight into the traditions of the original occupants of the land, along with the contextual circumstances under which those traditions were interrupted.

While these trees are fascinating on an aesthetic level, they also stand as the only recorded source of pre-colonial alcohol available on this island – and certainly the only plant on record as ever having ever been *deliberately* fermented for the purposes of *making* alcohol.

I had driven many times past a great swath of the bleached twisted skeletal remains of a stand of trees on a small roadside hill above the Shannon Lagoon on my journeys home to the family farm via the Lake Highway, and had often pondered upon the story behind their decimation. Michael Cousins, the Parks and Wildlife Ranger at the Liawenee station had given me some black and white photocopied

[68] See; Boyce, James. *Van Diemen's Land*. Melbourne, Vic. : Black Inc.,2008.

pages of information on the trees I was in search of, and it came as a source of great sadness to hear that that was the first place I should look.

My first tangible experience of walking into a dead stand amidst a snow squall on the plains near Miena, has stayed strong in my memory – it was as if I were gazing upon something completely neglected, yet inherently great – left in a mummified state to decay in the fields. In their lifetime these served as mute witness to the legendary events in Tasmanian history, and were themselves entangled within that history. - they have provided a source, and site, for inter-tribal celebrations that I would consider to be comparable in a local context with that of the Bogong Moth and Bunya Pine gatherings on mainland Australia. The practice of collecting and partaking in the alchoholic fermented sap was an important part of indigenous Tasmanian cultural life. These trees provided part of an important reason for trade and ceremonial visitation to take place amicably in *Lairmairrener* country, providing a good reason for the arms of warring parties to be laid to rest in the interest of both trade and celebration[69] - celebrations in which the sharing of the only form of intoxicant that the Island culture knew, would have undoubtedly have played some part.[70]

[69] Tim Jetson, Gwen Hardstaff, Graeme Calder et al.

[70] Tim Jetson stated in the *Roof of Tasmania* that "In summer, many of the bands of those tribes [North, North Midlands, Oyster bay and South East] migrated to the highlands for the intoxicating sap of the Cider Gum and the abundant game"." Jetson, Tim. The Roof of Tasmania: a history of the Central Plateau. Launceston, Tas : Pelion Press, 1989. p. 3.

Jorgen Jorgenson, the colonial author, explorer and roving party leader with some particular insight into the pre-colonial life of the *Lairmairrener* described such a place and event in the heart of Cider Gum and Native Hut country:[71]

> *"There is a part of the island, consisting of large plains, beyond the River Ouse in a north west direction, where the various tribes of the eastward and interior, used to meet in the month of November every year, there to hold a grand corrobory [sic] and to exhibit feats and to engage in certain sports in which they took a lively interest."*[72]

The seasonal timing of these 'Grand Corroborees' would seem to coincide with the availability of Cider Gum sap, as the tree begins to increasingly exude its sweet syrupy sap in the warmer months from the springtime onwards. If left to its own devices the tree is given to naturally fermenting in the swollen paunch-like boughs and trunks of the tree over the prolonged heat of the summer months. The sap will gradually undergo a natural transformation as the season progresses,

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[71]Jorgen Jorgenson, while in the same area as part of on an overland exploratory expedition for the Van Diemen's Land Company, also noted in his journal on the 2nd September 1826, "a great number of Native huts, the inmates absent". Cited from; Calder, Graeme. *Levee, Line and Martial law: A History of the Dispossession of the Mairremmener People of Van Diemen's Land 1803-1832*. Launceston, Tas. : Fullers Bookshop, 2010. p. 39.

[72] During the Black War, Jorgenson unsuccessfully attempted to ambush and capture the participants of the gathering while leading a Roving Party (armed groups of men attempting to capture and bring in the native tribes) in 1829.
Jorgenson, Jorgen. *Jorgen Jorgenson and the Aborigines of Van Diemen's Land: being a reconstruction of his "lost" book on their customs and habits, and on his role in the Roving Parties and the Black Line / N.J.B. Plomley, editor*. Hobart : Blubber Head Press, 1991..p. 68.

starting out as a sweet sugary syrup which gradually ferments and coagulates into the more bitter and acrid fermented state. Candied crusts will also form on the outsides of the bark where the excess sap has seeped out into the open air where they are feasted upon by insects.

However rather than simply utilize the sap in its natural state the *Lairmairrener* tapped the trees, cutting notches into the flesh of the tree with stone tools, for the sap to run down the trunk into specially constructed fermenting troughs which were dug into the earth at the foot of the trees and upon filling with sap were covered with large flat stones to aid and improve the fermentation process. This production of cider constituted a basic form of brewing, which produced a "much sought after, mildly alcoholic drink."[73]

The cultural history of these trees quickly infiltrated the subsequent cultural practice of the new wave of Tasmanians on the Plateau, as the consumption of this native liquor was taken up by stock-keepers and shepherds (and probably previously by kangaroo hunters and bushrangers) from the earliest days of the colonial occupation.[74] The practice was certainly well ingrained by the time William Breton made his journey to the Central Plateau in 1841, whereupon he noted:

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[73] A commonly used description of the 'cider' of Cider Gum, in this instance quoted from Graeme Calder.
Calder, Graeme. *Levee, Line and Martial law: A History of the Dispossession of the Mairremmener People of Van Diemen's Land 1803-1832*. Launceston, Tas. : Fullers Bookshop, 2010. p. 43.

[74] The Bushranger Michael Howe, who essentially took up residence on the Central Plateau for his tenure as a Bushranger, had as his companion a *Lairmairrener* lady by name of Black Mary, and one can only assume that the trees would have been taken in by bushrangers as a local food source in the tradition of the *Lairmairrener*, and that Howe himself would be well aware of this form of native alcohol.

"*The Shepherds and stock-keepers who tend to the flocks and herds on that elevated region are in the habit of making deep incisions [in the trunk of the cider gums] wherever an exudation of the sap is perceived … The holes are made in such a manner as to retain the sap … and large enough to hold a pint. Each tree yields from half to a pint daily …*"[75]

On a number of my own field trips to the Plateau, I observed the basic ruins of snarers' and trappers' shelters in close proximity to the remains of Cider Gum trees, and I considered it fairly obvious that these campsites were situated in places that would have had a shared history beyond that of simply European usage, as obviously the lay of the land and the spots that are sheltered from the westerlies have not changed. Richard Cosgrove's words concerning the habits of the original Tasmanians on the Plateau, have a universal ring to them:

"People situated themselves in areas where they could take advantage of the resources of the lake and forest

[75] Breton, William Henry. *Excursion to the Western Range, Tasmania*. Tasmanian Journal of Natural Science, Agriculture, Statistics, etc. Vol. II (1846), pp. 121-141 [p. 140.]
It appears from the descriptions that the *Lairremmener* and the shepherd's/stock-keeper's approach to tapping these tree differed slightly insofar as the *Lairremmener* practice sounds slightly more ecologically sustainable and gentle on the tree – it's easy to imagine the shepherd's practice of gouging deep holes into the flesh of the tree large enough to hold a pint glass being a fairly brutal proposition for its wellbeing. This leads one to consider the difference in attitudes towards the natural environment that these two cultural groups espoused. Also worth noting is that if Beaumont's description of the trees already being in a state of semi-destruction in 1817 is anything to go by, it may even be worth considering that this kind of increased pressure would have played some minor role in the legacy of depletion that the species has subsequently suffered.

and where protection from the variable highland weather was maximized."[76]

The way in which congenial relationships with this tree have bridged cultural inhabitation of the land make it an especially significant symbol; it represents something that sits very close to the heart of social relationships and alcoholic intoxicants. It is evident that throughout the history of human culture since Neolithic times, the use of intoxicants in one form or another have played an important central role - with alcohol in particular being the most universally prevalent. While the ancient Egyptians were making wine from pomegranates; the ancient Tasmanians were getting their grog from a tapped gum tree. From the traditional Aboriginal people of the plateau, to the bushrangers, stock keepers, graziers, fur hunters, Hydro Electric Commission dam builders, second world war refugee migrant workers, to the contemporary bushwalkers and fly-fisherman of today, people have lived alongside these trees and tasted the sweet sap, some even becoming drunk from the loins of its swollen burls. Possibly one of the earliest European written accounts of the Cider Gum trees was penned by John Beamont, who took an exploratory 'excursion' to the Western Mountains in 1817. Sadly prophetic in the noting of already obviously distressed trees at that time, Beaumont tells us that there were *"some very fine plains, the Shannon taking its course through them [St. Patrick's Plains]; observed a number of Trees ... from which the natives*

[76] Cosgrove, Richard. *Aboriginal economy and settlement in the Tasmanian Central Highlands*, Sandy Bay, Tas. : National Parks and Wildlife Service, 1984. p. 85.

Damon Bird, *Cider Gum site showing snarer's shelter ruin under fallen Cider Gum limb*. Digital Photograph. 2007.

Damon Bird, *base of Cider Gum showing possible remains of fermentation trough*.
Digital image 2007.

Damon Bird, *Cider Gum tapping scar*. Digital photograph, 2007

get a liquid like cyder [sic]... many of these trees have been destroyed in consequence ... "[78]

Another early account, six years later, was that of Dr. James Ross in 1823. Ross was an early settler in the Bothwell area whose observations resulting from an expedition to the plateau were published in the Hobart Town Almanac in 1830. His observations signified, some 26 years after settlement began, the first time that the 'Big River Tribe' appeared in the European historical record.[80] Concerning the Cider Gums he wrote:

> "*Among them grow some fine specimens of the species of eucalyptus called the cider tree, from it's exuding a quantity of saccharine liquid resembling molasses. Streaks of it were to be seen dripping down the bark in various parts, which we tasted, and found very palatable. The natives have a method at the proper season for grinding holes in the tree from which the sweet juice flows plentifully, and is collected in a hole at the root. We saw some of these covered up with a flat stone, doubtless to prevent the wild animals from coming to drink it. When allowed to remain sometime, and to*

[78] Beamont, John. **"***Copy of Mr Beaumont's Journal taken on his Tour to the Western Mountains, Van Diemen's Land"*.[Monday, December 1st, 1817]. *Historical Records of Australia.,Series 3. Despatches and Papers Relating to the Settlement of the States. Volume 3. Tasmania: January-December, 1820*. Sydney : Library Committee of the Commonwealth Parliament, 1921. p. 587.
[80] According to Tim Jetson.

ferment, it settles into a course sort of wine or cider, rather intoxicating if drunk to any excess".[81]

Two other important sources of documented early European exploration of the Central Highlands originate in the accounts of George Augustus Robinson and Jorgen Jorgenson, the infamous Danish 'Convict King of Iceland'.[82] Jorgenson led a party into the "as yet unexplored" parts of the plateau in 1826, under the employment of the newly established Van Diemen's Land Company in the interest of discovering a workable overland stock-route between Hobart Town and Circular Head. Later, during the intensified days of the Black War Jorgenson was also a roving party leader whose movements included the Central Plateau. George Augustus Robinson is well known as the 'conciliator' of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people, and at the employ of the government, facilitated the peaceful surrender and exile of the majority of the remaining members of the warring tribes to Wybaleena on Flinders Island. His 20-year appointment as Chief Protector of Aborigines (between Van Diemen's Land and Port Phillip) started in 1829 and ended in the abolition of this ultimately failed title in 1849. Robinson's 'Friendly Mission' in 1831 brought in the remainder of the Big River Tribe, the traditional owners of the highland country, who along with the people of Oyster Bay, were among the most notoriously

[81] Ross, Dr. James. Hobart Town Almanac. Hobart. Dr. James Ross was publisher of the *Hobart Town Almanack*, and his property, 'The Hermitage', was on the Shannon River. Quote sourced from; Cosgrove, Richard. *Aboriginal Economy and Settlement in the Tasmanian Central Highlands*. Sandy Bay, Tas. : National Parks and Wildlife Service, 1984. p. 119.

[82] In a strange twist of events during the Icelandic Revolution of 1809, Jorgenson briefly became King of Iceland. See;
Sprod, Dan. *The Usurper: Jorgen Jorgenson and his turbulent life in Iceland and Van Diemen's Land, 1780-1841*. Sandy Bay, Tas. : Blubber Head Press, 2001.

William Paul Dowling, *Portrait of George Augustus Robinson*. (Date unknown) 53 x 39 mm. Inscribed on reverse: "copied from original photographs taken in London, rec'd. from R.C. Gunn, 29 Sept 1873. Died 18th Oct 1866 – Hair belongs to a wig which he constantly wore". Collection: Allport Library and Museum of Fine Arts.

Unknown Artist (previously thought to be a Self Portrait), *Painting of Jorgen Jorgenson*. Collection: Archives Office of Tasmania.

fierce combatants in the guerrilla war campaign, known as the Black War, conducted against white settlers of colonial Van Diemen's Land.[84]

The prospect of this brutal and bloody racial war has for many years conjured many a grotesque and appalling image in my mind. Indeed, the atrociously sickening story of the founding of the island by the British usurpers is one written in the blood of its original countrymen. I cannot extinguish from my mind such things as the described image of an English stock-keeper, found laying in the bush speared and beaten to death with waddies – his contorted skull smashed to a shattered nebulous dough with pieces of dead wood jabbed into the mangled eye sockets to give the appearance of the horns of a cow, or an Aboriginal man's hand laying severed in a field, lodged in a flour-dusted man-trap. These images of pooled dried blood and the stench of death amid hovering blowflies resonate amongst the quiet calm of birdsong in the Tasmanian bush.[85]

[84] The 'Black War' has been loosely defined by Aboriginal resistance to colonial expansion leading to a series of systematic political and military actions against the Aboriginal people by the British beginning in government proclamations, and culminating in the implementation of Martial Law, whereby Aboriginal people, unbeknownst to themselves, were forbidden from settled districts, and Redcoat military operations against them were put in place in the form of armed and regimented horseback parties, Roving Parties, and finally, 'the Black Line'; historically relegated as a failed military movement across the majority of the island to remove the 'hostile blacks'.

[85] There are a myriad of greater horrors that could be recounted, of stockmen collecting the ears of Aboriginal people, using severed black fingers as tobacco stoppers, the castration of men and rape of women, outright slavery and torture, infanticide, the burning to death of women and children, not to mention the wholesale mass slaughter by military regiments, rural community lynching's and the hunting of Aboriginal people on horseback for sport. The list of sickening atrocities goes on and on, reading like a guidebook to the most unimaginable and depraved acts of inhumanity. It has even been claimed that Aboriginal people were killed for dog-meat by some of the English.

Just as it would seem that the Aboriginal people wanted European man, woman, child and livestock alike banished from their lands, the colonists believed in their own right to occupancy and personal property. Under such culturally arrogant laws of Terra Nullius the native people of this Island were regarded by crown and country as subservient 'children' of the British colony. And as such, under complete legal authority, people and place were exploited, defiled, and replaced. That the invasive founding of this place quickly culminated in a predominant will for extirpation in the veins of the colonists is perhaps the greatest shame a society could possibly live under, and it is also a spectre that remains largely unspoken of and buried – lost and seemingly denied in the recesses of the contemporary Tasmanian cultural psyche.

In his recent book, *Van Diemen's Land*, James Boyce drew similar conclusions on the near extinction of the Tasmanian people (as did previous historians Clive Turnbull and Bronwyn Desailly) in stating that "*the black hole of Tasmanian history is not the violence between the white settlers and the Aborigines – a well-recorded and much discussed aspect of the British conquest – but the government sponsored ethnic clearances which followed it.*"[86] Boyce's thesis, and one that I agree with, is that the tragic plight of the original people of Tasmania in the hands of a brutal colonial usurpation was no inevitable or accidental occurrence. The attempted genocidal aspect of our history is very real, and it constitutes a holocaust of sorts - a veritable apocalypse.

[86] Boyce, James. *Van Diemen's Land*. Melbourne, Vic. : Black inc., 2008. p. 296.

George Augustus Robinson, as an instigator (ignorant or otherwise) of ethnic and cultural cleansing, comes across as a humane man, albeit driven as much by the prospect of financial reward and fame, as he was by a theological and welfare concern for the 'children' of the wilds. There is no doubt that his mission was to see the Aboriginal people relinquish their own culture and be clothed and converted to Christianity, and to see them taught to work and assimilate into the embedded colonial culture. Robinson himself stated in later life that his motivations were "*actuated solely by a desire to serve the aborigines, to do them good, to ameliorate their wretched conditions and raise them in the scale of civilization*".[87] But it is also, perhaps, one of the greatest aspects of the outplayed colonial tragedy that, as Cassandra Pybus put it, "*despite their long and intimate association, neither Robinson nor his Aboriginal companions ever managed to comprehend each other's motives and expectations*".[88]

It was under these circumstances of war, mixed motives, massacre and misery that Robinson ventured onto the Central Plateau engaged in the last of the Friendly Mission expeditions to 'bring in' the *Lairmairrener*, (Big River Tribe). This expedition took place from October to December of 1831. The *Lairmairrener* were the traditional owners of the highland lake country that contained the Cider Gum trees, and apart from being identified as one of the most ferocious groups in their actions against white settlement during the Black War, very little was known of their culture in the time that they inhabited their native land, uninhibited by colonialism. It is clear however that they were

[87] Pybus, Cassandra Jane. *Community of Thieves*. Port Melbourne : William Heinemann Australia, 1991. p. 60.
[88] Ibid, p. 81.

willing to fight to the bitter end for their country, and that Robinson's native guides were increasingly nervous about running in with them. His journal entries offer a valuable insight into both the homelands of the tribe as well as Cider Gum habitat at a time when European encroachment was still very limited.

Robinson's first observation of what he would come to refer to as the 'melliferous cider tree' was in the area of the Shannon River, recorded in his field journal on the 28th of November, 1831:

> *"the natives caught seven kangaroos this evening, but what interested me the most were the numerous cider trees which skirted this extensive plain and which were the first I had seen. Most of those trees had been tapped by the natives. This they had effected by perforating a hole in the tree a short distance above the ground by means of sharp stones and then making a hole at the bottom of the tree into which the liquid is conveyed and from which they extract it, sometimes if the hole is small by sucking it through a reed or twisted bark. In some of these holes I observed upwards of a quart of this juice and which my people greedily partook of. It is exceedingly sweet and well flavoured and in this respect resembles the flavour of cider. Some that had been dried by the sun had an apple taste. The tree in appearance resembles the blue gum, but the leaf when closely inspected has a different form and the bark is more of a dark blue colour. This tree grows to a large*

size; the wood appears brittle. The natives are very fond of the juice and I am told it frequently makes them drunk."[89]

Continuing on the journey, the mission made its way west before eventually looping back around towards the southern shores of the Great Lake. Shortly before arriving at the lakeside, on the 4th of December 1831, Robinson made his next observation on the Cider Gum:

"On the borders of this marsh the mellifluent cider tree had planted itself in the foreground or front of the forest. Those trees have invariably selected exposed and bleak situations on the borders of open plains, and are seldom met with in the interstices of the forest. I have met with them in the highest mountains. The melliferous property of this tree subjects it not only to the attack of the natives who have made incisions in the tree and dug holes at the bottom for the liquid to drain into, but likewise to the cockatoo and other animals who have attacked it and tore holes in the bark. Ants also are seen in swarms feeding on the honey."[90]

The party continued onwards in a northeasterly direction, fording the Shannon River at its source on the Great Lake (later the site where the Hydro Electric Commission built a dam wall that would

[89] Robinson, George Augustus. *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson 1829-1834. Edited by NJB Plomley*. Launceston, Tas, : Queen Victoria Museum And Art Gallery ; Hobart, Tas. : Quintus Publishing, 2008. p. 566.
[90] Ibid. p. 571.

irrevocably alter the surrounding wetland ecology by significantly raising the level of the Great Lake to feed the Shannon and Waddamana hydroelectricity schemes). Near the lake they encountered a stock hut resembling a windowless bush turret, owned by an early cattle barron named Lloyd. In it a solitary shepherd hid, terrified and barricaded against the Big River Tribe. The group continued along the native roads to the northwest corner of the Arthurs Lakes, where on the 6th of December 1831 Robinson noted that:

> "*The melliferous cider tree was growing here luxuriantly and was far more numerous than I had seen in any other part. My aborigines informed me that the natives very frequently visited this part for the purpose of sucking the honey which they got from these trees. From many of the trees it was oozing out in tolerable quantities. There was a small forest of these trees and the honey was very delicious in taste.*"[91]

At this place, now drowned by the H.E.C, there were a number of the Big River Tribes native huts, in of which Robinson described artwork resembling "*trees, men and women, also numerous circles of different diameter*".[92] After leaving this place the party continued on to Tumbledown Creek, where Robinson again noted the cider gum growing and 'oozing out' its sap near where they camped on the 13th of December. The next three days in the area were spent travelling in a circle as Robinsons native guides first attempted to lead him down the mountain to the 'City of Ochre', near Mole Creek at the Gog Range,

[91] Ibid. p. 575.
[92] Ibid. p. 575.

before then leading him back to the Cider Gum stands of Arthurs Lakes.[93] It was on the southern shores of the northern lake (Arthurs Lake being two separate lakes before H.E.C. flooding), an area also now drowned, that on the 16th of December Robinson again described an encounter with *Eucalyptus gunnii*:

> "*The melliferous cider tree was growing most luxuriantly, some of them twelve feet in circumference, and the liquid was oozing out in tolerable quantities. Holes at the bottom of these trees had been made to receive the juice and which answered the purpose of a tank. Some of the liquor had dried and was white and resembled in appearance and a bruised apple; some was brown. It was amusing to see the natives run from tree to tree to suck this juice, of which they are very fond. The birds may be seen attacking this tree for this luscious juice; the animals also resort to these trees for the same purpose, i.e. the opossum."*[94]

In this vicinity, Robinson found a woman's skull on the ground which he later alarmed his companions with possessing – a woman who they told him had died from the cold. In the coming days the group would celebrate Christmas in the mountains before again heading west where

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[93] [93] The City of Ochre – or *Toolumbunner*; was perhaps the largest Tasmanian Aboriginal ochre mines on the Island. Situated now on private land, in the neighborhood of my family farm. It's archeological and historical details, as they could be discerned were detailed in; *Bruising the Red Earth: Ochre Mining and Ritual in Aboriginal Tasmania / Edited by Antonio Sagona*. Carlton, Vic. : Melbourne University press, 1994.

[94] Robinson, George Augustus. *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson 1829-1834. Edited by NJB Plomley*. Launceston, Tas, : Queen Victoria Museum And Art Gallery ; Hobart, Tas. : Quintus Publishing, 2008. p. 589.

they eventually met with the notorious Big River Tribe, the last major tribe of its kind still 'at large', who then consisted of sixteen men, nine women, one child and one hundred dogs.[95] In the days preceding this event, Robinson recounted that they were within "*the country where the blacks have constantly domiciled and had remained undisturbed by their white enemies. Kangaroo was in abundance in those parts and this country must be a fine resort for the natives, there being thousands of acres of clear land and excellent pasture."*[96]

It is now widely believed that it was the Big River Tribe of people, who on an annual migration to the shores of the Derwent River in the spring of 1804, met with the first settlers while driving game into the area near Risdon Cove, whereupon they were fired upon, and the first massacre in the hands of the English was recorded. It is a heartbreaking proposition to consider that within twenty seven years of that first encounter with European culture, on the 31st of December 1831, the remainder of this same group of people, caught in the grips on an increasingly futile war for territory and survival, relinquished their foothold in the mountains, and entrusted their fate with Robinson, a self-educated evangelist builder and bricklayer from Islington, London. And it is all the more heartbreaking to consider that this event took place under the visage of those straggly cider producing gums in the same locale of those celebratory gatherings once described by Jorgen Jorgenson.[97]

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[95] Ibid. p. 602.
[96] Ibid. p. 548.
[97] As noted by Graeme Calder, who puts the location of 'capture' at Platform Bluff, south-west of the Great Lake, now known as *Skittleball Hill.* See;

On the Central Plateau, the Big River people left behind a homeland region; a place saturated with stories and lived experience about which little will ever be now known. At the time that they walked away from it, it was still marked as 'area unexplored' on most contemporary European maps of the time. Yet before long this place was readily engulfed by the appetite of colonial expansion - chewed up and reconfigured by the transformative digestion of cultural cannibalism.

The Cider Gum tree remains symbolically situated as a central signpost in this terrain, a central living component of the pre-colonial culture that existed symbiotically on the plateau for thousands of years. It has served as mute witness to the heights of both halcyon antiquity and atrocity before subsequently suffering its decline through the sustained blunt force trauma of human agency. Tragically, the fatalistic trajectory of the tree runs uncannily parallel with that of the original human culture within once it was so inherently interwoven.

Calder, Graeme. *Levee, Line and Martial Law: A History of the Dispossession of the Mairremmener People of Van Diemen's Land 1803-1832*. Launceston, Tas. : Fullers Bookshop, 2010.

My Head on a Spit for the Price of a Passage to England

It was native game that first drew Englishmen to the Central Plateau. In the first decade of European settlement the convict kangaroo hunters and bushrangers were the de facto explorers of lands that would remain a void on official maps until the mid 1830s. In fact until around the mid 1820s, the Plateau and its recesses were the sanctuary of choice for an increasing number of these reprobates of the convict system illegally at large. These people were a blight on the governmental efforts in facilitating free settlement through the implementation of extensive land grants, and were hunted by the military and had bounties placed on their heads. But beyond that, they were the first Europeans to live in the Central Plateau and in doing so develop a unique Vandiemonian way of life in the mountains.

Violent conflict and robberies resulting in death and property loss were never something that was going to be tolerated in a society that placed greater value on material possession than life itself, and such actions were certainly a plague on both the wealthy elite and the government in their attempts to grow the fledgling colony out of its island prison origins and into an autonomous economy. But if the eventual fate of the lawless was perhaps inevitable, it is much less clear how legitimate were the grounds that these convict bushmen, kangaroo hunters, and bushrangers to be readily blamed for the initial mistreatment of the Tasmanian Aboriginal people - and beginning the frontier wars. On the contrary to this assertion is a record of events

that would seemingly reveal that it was not until the extensive land grant system that unleashed a flood of wealthy landowners onto the Island that frontier conflict is known to have begun in earnest, and early bushmen are known to have lived reasonably harmoniously with the indigenous people – engaging in trade, and introducing them to hunting dogs.

Sadly however, subjecting the indigenous population to acts of cruelty and subjugation were part and parcel of colonial society in Van Diemen's Land, and it remains clear that within all levels of society there were those possessed with the intent of barbarity and molestation. Stories of scrotums ending up as tobacco pouches, and severed fingers being used as pipe stoppers, whether real or exaggerated, bear grim witness to at least some sense of the atmosphere of the day. There is a general understanding of the history that unknown atrocities occurred uninhibited, unrecorded, and unaccounted for in the unsettled parts of the island.

In 1815 a kangaroo hunter and ex-convict by the name of Thomas Toombs was believed to be the first white man to 'discover' the Great Lake. At this time the area abounded with a number of species that would be driven to extinction by demands of the collective devouring stomach of the English – the Forestier Kangaroo, Thylacine, and Tasmanian Emu were among those that occupied their respective ecological niches in healthy populations which were duly exploited by hungry colonial mouths beset by food shortages and a ravenous hunger for kangaroo meat. The entire early Vandiemonian economy in

fact, was based around *Meat* and *Skins*, of which the Central Plateau was a rich resource.[98]

1815 was also the year that Martial Law was first implemented in colonial Van Diemen's Land. Historically this happened twice - once as a measure against the bushrangers, and once against the indigenous population.[99] Both of these target groups took refuge in the Central Plateau and both of these groups are representative of what James Boyce would term the 'hated' and 'indelible' stains of the Vandiemonian colonial past – convictism and the fate of the Tasmanian Aborigines.

One of the first most notorious groups of bushrangers to be associated with the Central Plateau, (finding themselves within the roving military sights of colonial warfare under the guise of Martial Law) was the 'Whitehead-Howe Gang' - a collection of around thirty military deserters and absconded convicts. Michael Howe, (who became the leader of the gang after carrying out the mortally wounded John Whitehead's last wishes for him to cut off his head so that no reward could be obtained for his death) could well be considered one of the first true Vandiemonian characters. 'At large' from 1816 to 1818, and making his home on the Central Plateau, he is known to have associated closely with the local tribes. Howe was said to have dressed entirely in skins and furs (he wore, quite literally a *dress* made

[98] See; Boyce, James. *Van Diemen's Land*. Melbourne, Vic. : Black Inc.,2008.
[99] Graeme Calder asserts that in the declaration of martial law against the indigenous tribes was directed at the Big River and Oyster Bay tribes exclusively. See; Calder, Graeme. *Levee, Line and Martial Law: A History of the Dispossession of the Mairremmener People of Van Diemen's Land 1803-1832*. Launceston, Tas. : Fullers Bookshop, 2010.

out of kangaroo skins). He had a *Lairremmener* 'wife' known as Black Mary (who he betrayed to his downfall[100]), and took residence in a secluded idyllic valley near the Shannon River where he built a hut and attempted to grow herbs and vegetables.[101]

Howe's group of bushrangers rivalled the official government in influence and power at a certain point in colonial history, and at one point threatened to overthrow the government.[102] Howe wrote letters to Governor Davey (or, "Mad Tom" Davey) *as his equal*, referring to himself as *Lieutenant Governor of the Woods*. He said to have collaborated with some of the wealthiest landowners in the colony (including Edward Lord, an officer of the Marines, and early pastoralist and cattle baron of the Plateau), and virtually controlled the supply of meat and fur to the colonial outpost of Hobart Town, who relied so heavily upon it.

As a bushranger, I imagine Howe to have almost resembled, for a time at least, a recluse in hiding from a system that he felt mistreated by. With Cider Gum wine on the breath and clad in furs, he resided in his Plateau retreat where he attempted to retire permanently,

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[100] As K. R. Von Stieglitz put it, "advanced pregnancy prevented her from keeping pace, but his wounding her was probably an accident when he was firing at soldiers who were in hot pursuit".
Australian Dictionary of Biography website. Stieglitz. K. R. *Howe, Michael (1787-1818).* Accessed November 17th, 2012, http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/howe-michael-2206

[101] Years later when Dr. Ross found Howe's retreat, he described it as "*a hut in a secluded mountain valley. The floor was neatly laid with bark, a huge honeysuckle sheltered it in the rear, and a sweet stream trickled below the grassy slope in front"*
Boyce, James. *Van Diemen's Land*. Melbourne, Vic. : Black Inc.,2008. p. 93.

[102] One Lloyd Robson is quoted as saying that "*during the period of Davey's administration the bushrangers nearly took over Van Diemen's Land*".
Boyce, James. *Van Diemen's Land*. Melbourne, Vic. : Black Inc.,2008. p. 74.

training a honey suckle over the hut entrance, and writing a book of dreams in kangaroo blood ink on animal skin paper.[103] Ultimately Howe was tracked down in October of 1818 and fell during the struggle to take him – his brains were bashed out of his skull with the barrel of a musket on the banks of the Shannon River, his body buried where he fell, and his head cut off and stuck on a spit in Hobart Town.[104]
His story is but one of many narratives running through the highland past that is full of gruesome and bloody imagery. In the following years leading up to the height of the Black War, many a stock-keeper (without such congenial understandings with the local tribes as Michael Howe) met a grizzly fate as the waves of human violence lapped at the shores of the highland lakes. As the trajectory of pastoral expansion taking place from 1819 to 1832 inevitably found its way to the "*thousands of acres of clear land and excellent pasture*"[105] abounding in the lower plateau districts, things turned ugly when the true locals were thoroughly put out.

Plenty has been written of the atrocities committed on both sides of the Black War. Needless to say, it culminated on the Plateau with a

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[103] The contents of this journal were said to have revolved around dreams of his sister, and his dead companions haunting him, and also lists of seeds, vegetables, fruits and flowers of which he planned to acquire to cultivate and adorn his mountain cabin.See; West, John. *The History of Tasmania*. Sydney : Angus and Robertson in association with the Royal Australia Historical Society, 1971. p.136.
[104] His death represents a milestone of success in the colonial governments political agenda to quell the predominant outlying Vandiemonian subculture, which was as scraggly as an old gum tree and based on European peasantries shared land traditions developing in the outlaying regions, to make way for a higher class of pastoralist – a second wave of military might was ultimately utilized for the same agenda against the *Lairremmener*.
[105] [105] Robinson, George Augustus. *Friendly Mission:The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson 1829-1834. Edited by NJB Plomley*. Launceston, Tas, : Queen Victoria Museum And Art Gallery ; Hobart, Tas. : Quintus Publishing, 2008. p. 547.

concentration of native murders throughout the region during the late 1820s coinciding with the timing of seasonal migration habits between the *Lairremmener* and the *Mairremmener.*[106] And as the remaining clans-folk retreated from traditional country and banded together in the Central Plateau,[107] the great wave of intensity in opposition to settlement in the area momentarily crested, as for a small hovering season the settlers were for a while driven away, and properties abandoned.[108]

[106] A thesis put forward by Graeme Calder. See;
Calder, Graeme. *Levee, Line and Martial Law: A History of the Dispossession of the Mairremmener People of Van Diemen's Land 1803-1832.* Launceston, Tas. : Fullers Bookshop, 2010.

[107] *"We are credibly informed, that no Natives are now to be observed on any part of the coast, which is in some measure accounted for by the great number seen in the interior, where it is apprehended the Aborigines in general have lately formed themselves into one formidable body."*
The Hobart Town Gazette – 6 August 1824.

[108] "The temporary abandonment of the settlements on the Ouse River was a small victory … evidence of the effectiveness of their hit and run tactics". A return to Martial Law, the implementation of Roving Parties, and eventually a human-bounty system was the return volley.
Calder, Graeme. *Levee, Line and Martial Law: A History of the Dispossession of the Mairremmener People of Van Diemen's Land 1803-1832.* Launceston, Tas. : Fullers Bookshop, 2010. p. 169.

Gunnii

In the period after these ethnic clearances of the Central Plateau, a new type of explorer would eventually cast a new kind of eye over the terrain. In a landscape described at this time as possessing an aspect "*far too repulsive in character to cheer the mind or amuse the eye,*"[109] lake shorelines were encountered awash with the rotting stinking carcasses of masses of dead eels, emitting a stench so repulsive that the stockkeeper's hut at Arthurs Lakes was left abandoned, with a half grown, starved thylacine chained to a tree nearby.[110] In this seemingly post-indigenous highland world, the wealthy sons of landowners had gained the leisure to examine the plateau from a botanical viewpoint.

The botanical name of the Cider Gum tree, *Eucalyptus gunnii,* is named after Ronald Campbell Gunn, who was an early botanist of Tasmania (and also a public servant and politician). Gunn, a former lieutenant of the 72nd Regiment, had come to Van Diemen's Land in 1830 and taken on the role of superintendent of convicts at Launceston, the first of his many roles in public service.[111] At one time he was the private secretary of Sir John Franklin, and would also for a time, later manage the local estates of Lady Jane Franklin. Formally to this however, he held the role of managing the estates of William Lawrence, who had large tracts of land in today's Cressy district on the fringes of the Western Tiers, and summer grazing runs in the

[109] Breton, William Henry. *Excursion to the Western Range, Tasmania*. Tasmanian journal of natural science, agriculture, statistics, etc. Vol. II (1846), pp. 121-141. [p.137.]
[110] Ibid. p. 137
[111] He also later served as Justice of the Peace in 1833, police magistrate of circular head in 1836.

Arthurs Lakes area. Gunn made the acquaintance of William Lawrence's son, Robert William Lawrence, who was a keen naturalist, through whom Gunn became involved in plant collecting for William Jackson Hooker of Glasgow University.

Both Lawrence and Gunn were the first naturalists to be associated with the Central Plateau, and although it was Lawrence who first made naturalist expeditions into the lakes country, and likely collected the first specimens of the Cider Gum tree, it was Gunn who had begun dispatching the items that both men collected to England. Gunn continued correspondence with Hooker upon Lawrence's sudden death, caused by an apoplectic fit, or 'visitation from God', on his 26th birthday (and wedding anniversary) in the weeks following the untimely death of his wife Anne in 1833 during childbirth. Subsequent to these strange and tragic events, Gunn became the lone Plateau collector, and eventual namesake of the Cider Gum, tree at Hooker's bequest[112] - thus *Eucalyptus gunnii* was included, and first appeared under that name, in the first botanical study of Tasmania, entitled *Flora Tasmaniae*, published in 1860 by Joseph Dalton Hooker (William J. Hooker's son), who in part dedicated the text to Gunn.[113]

[112] See; Jetson, Tim. The Roof of Tasmania: a history of the Central Plateau. Launceston, Tas : Pelion Press, 1989. pp. 47-49.
Also see;
Burns. T.E. and Skemp. J.R. *Gunn, Ronald Campbell (1808-1881).* Australian Dictionary of Biography, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University. Accessed November 18th, 2012, http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/gunn-ronald-campbell-2134
[113] Ibid.

Plateau Traumascape & Post-Apocalyptic Terrain

It can be seen that there is a rich layering of human subtext to the terrain of the Central Highlands, with different historical phases heaped on top of one another like the layers of a compost heap – slowly decaying into the humus of place. In light of the various themes present in its surrounding human history, there is stark specter of absence lurking around the Cider Gums standing on the plateau today. When one considers the surrounding countryside as being at different times the homelands of the *Lairmairrener*, the retreat of Bushrangers, the sight of atrocity and colonial race war, pastoralist expansion, native game exploitation for meat and the fur trade, the cradle of the development of hydroelectricity and migrant work camps, to an area of shifting greater environmental consciousness seeing the implementation of National Parks and World Heritage management, to subsequent whims of recreational fishing, hunting and tourism – the lake country has had its fair share of changes in the human relationships that have in part shaped it.

It's easy to see the area as a kind of human wasteland in light of its eroded and decrepit appearance, and it having been stripped of so much of the cultural vitality so closely interwoven with it in the past. And certainly in the context of the indigenous heritage, where it was once a vibrant cultural center, there is a deep sense of it as a kind of post-apocalyptic terrain. Apocalyptic is certainly what it has been for me in my journey of engaging with it – after all Apocalypse does not just mean *the end of the world*; it also denotes an event of great

importance, violence, and/or a prophetic disclosure or revelation. A personal apocalypse can simply be a significant realisation or discovery, and I take it on this level as much as I do to describe the ashen remains of the serpentine bodies of the Cider Gum trees that my art draws on.

It is clear to me that within the twisted anthropomorphic limbs of the mummified Cider Gums, something of an echo of the past human embodiment within the landscape can be perceived. And this by its very nature is the mixture of grotesquery and sensuality that the human landscape emits; the intimacy of close knit lived experience, composted into the thin, bleached skeletal forms of the Cider Gum. It is almost as if I have imaginatively reinstated the cider gums with the significance of totems. I feel that by drawing them, I am in a way imaginatively bringing them back to life; or at least paying homage to the lives woven amongst their entangled limbs, intermingled with the place. It is an elegiac proposition, but certainly through elegy there is a poetic sense of celebration.

But there is also emotional conflict, as in making these works I am forced to consider the involuntary complicity of my own fundamental identity in regards to the subject of these lamentations. As James Boyce put it, "*it is undeniable that convicts and their descendants were implicated in environmental destruction and a human tragedy of almost unimaginable proportions.*"[114] So I am a usurper. But I am also usurped. I put myself in the middle of that proposition.

[114] Boyce, James. *Van Diemen's Land*. Melbourne, Vic. : Black Inc.,2008. p. 11.

In her 2005 book *Traumascapes*, Maria Tumarkin puts forward the classification of a certain type of place marked by traumatic events. The Tasmanian site of Port Arthur was one of the places included in her case study, which she describes as a sort of *Ground Zero* of convictism – "*the most tangible and the most tantalizing legacy left by thousands of convicts transported from Great Britain*."[115] As *Traumascapes*, Tumarkin posits that certain places steeped with legacies of violence, suffering and loss, can never quite shake off the past completely; "*the past is never quite over*" she tells us,[116] "*they are a distinctive category of place, transformed physically and psychically by suffering, part of a scar tissue that now stretches across the world.*"[117]

And while such obvious monoliths as the ruins of Port Arthur exist to appease the heart of dark tourism and provide a more tangible embodiment of the colonial horror story, the past is interwoven and steeped into even the most isolated stretches of the Tasmanian environment, where more often than not, geological forms rather than architectural, surround the indeterminate scenes of this island's past. And a ruin, whether it be on the Tasman Peninsula, or a rarely visited pocket on the Plateau, is simply a perceptible signpost for events that occurred invisibly throughout the landscape.

A 'ruin', after all, as Tumarkin has reiterated, "*is not simply a descriptive term; it refers to a cultural process. To become ruins, remnants of destruction need to be reclaimed as possessing meaning*

[115] Tumarkin, Maria. *Traumascapes: the power and fate of places transformed by tradgedy*. Carlton, Vic. : Melbourne University Publishing, 2005. p. 46.
[116] Ibid. p.12.
[117] Ibid. p.13.

and a cultural value."[118] And this is precisely how I see my practice as engaging with the long dead remains of the Cider Gum stands on the Plateau. They are the fragile "*frozen embodiments of death and decay*", "*material culture violated and left to rot*".[119] And as such, they stand as "*sites of engagement, points of intersection between destruction and rebirth*"[120] – between people and the cultural environment.

Walter Benjamin, who coined the term *Auratic Perception* to denote a means of seeing and recovering an appreciation of myth and story within aesthetics, once said "*counsel woven into the fabric of lived experience is wisdom. The art of storytelling is drawing to an end because the epic side of truth – wisdom – is dying out*" but it is "*possible to sense a new beauty in what is vanishing.*"[121] It is a similar type of bruised beauty that I perceive in the ruins of the Cider Gum, and the lost history that they symbolise. According to Tumarkin, "*Benjamin believed that ruination leads to illumination. The truth of an object is revealed in its afterlife, its categorical proximity to oblivion.*"[122]

As ruins tied to both the ecological and cultural spectrum of the Central Plateau, the skeletal remains of the Cider Gums stand as *palimpsests*, complete with hidden layers of past overwritten and rubbed clean beneath the apparent surface. Deeply rooted in the place, both literally and metaphorically, they appear, with the right kind of eyes, as the reclaimed ghosts of cultures past. As Edward S. Casey

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[118] Ibid. p. 182.
[119] Ibid. p. 173.
[120] Ibid. p. 173.
[121] McCole, John Joseph. *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition*. Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press, 1993. p. 8.
[122] Tumarkin, Maria. *Traumascapes: the power and fate of places transformed by tradgedy*. Carlton, Vic. : Melbourne University Publishing, 2005. p.190.

put it, "*place is one of the principal links between the past and the present as traversed and brought together by the lived body*"[123]:

> *"As much as body or brain, mind or language, place is a keeper of memories-one of the main ways by which the past comes to be secured in the present, held in things before us and around us.*"[124]

In itself a palimpsest of embedded deep seeded cultural connections, a place is always going to be distinguished from space or a landscape by being so heavily impregnated with meaning and memory.[125] This is an inherently multi-layered concept:

> *"In its original meaning, 'palimpsest', of Greek derivation, refers to a re-used manuscript with its original text, usually on parchment, overwritten by other types of inscriptions (palim: 'again'; psestos: 'rubbed smooth'). A place is similarly layered and overwritten. Original structures are destroyed and others are built on their foundations; new meanings are superimposed on the old; some memories and histories rest on others, submerged or largely forgotten. Yet just like the manuscript, marks and traces of the past overwritten by the present are still there, lying underneath each place, an integral and indestructible part of that place, even if 'rubbed smooth.'"*[126]

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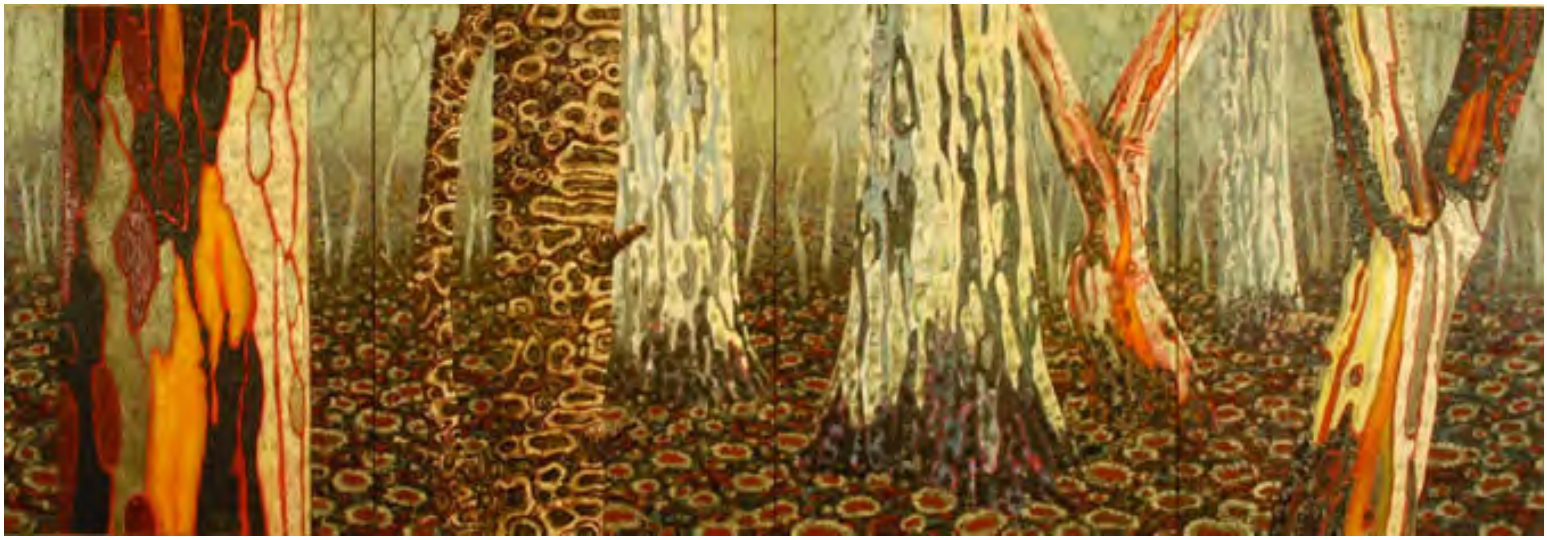
[123] Tumarkin, Maria. *Traumascapes: the power and fate of places transformed by tradgedy*. Carlton, Vic. : Melbourne University Publishing, 2005. p. 46.
[124] Ibid. pp. 128-129.
[125] See; Ibid. p. 46.
[126] Ibid. p. 225.

Certainly the post-apocalyptic enigma surrounding both these skeletal trees and the greater Plateau is made ever more real by considering it in the context of a war zone. On the level of the Black War, the original inhabitants of the land were removed to what can be seen as the British Empire's blueprint for the concentration camp at Wybaleena.[127] But the tendrils of World War II also worked their way into the psychic terrain of the Central Plateau, with a fair proportion of European migrant workers arriving in the highland H.E.C. camps as refuges of war.

[127] A concept fully realized by the British Empire later in the Second Boer War.



Richard Wastell, *Last night I dreamed an island gentle*, 2004. Acylic, oil, marble dust on canvas. 120x360cm

Chapter 4. Paths Towards Representations in a Contemporary Art Context

There is a rich tradition within post-colonial Tasmanian art of engaging directly with a sense of place as a key component of artistic exploration. A well trodden path has been established by many of my forebears in this field such as Geoff Parr, Bea Maddock, Raymond Arnold, David Stephenson, Julie Gough, Richard Wastell, Phillip Wolfhagen, David Keeling, Patrick Grieve, Anne Morrison, Milan Milojevic, Michael Schlitz, Leigh Hobba, Martin Walch and Troy Ruffels, to name some of the key figures one might associate within this area of visual arts in particular. All of these artists have informed my work in one way or another, particularly in light of my decade long relationship with the Tasmanian School of Art, with which many of the aforementioned artists have a close association. Two of these artists in particular, David Stephenson and Troy Ruffels, have previous to myself produced photo-based renderings of the Cider Gum.

I have a distinct memory of encountering Geoff Parr's seminal work, *Place*, as a young student in the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, and finding myself standing before it deeply pondering the images contained within its various light-boxes, transfixed and puzzled, essentially mirroring Parr himself as he stood looking up in contemplation at the foot of an enormous and strange crudely carved kangaroo on the side of a country road. Similarly the enormity of the inverted world offered to the viewer in Bea Maddock's expansive re-imagining of the Tasmanian coastline in her grandiose work *Terra*

Spiritus...with a darker shade of pale has impressed itself permanently on the lens of my artistic reasoning, as has encounters with Richard Wastell's *Last Night I Dreamed an Island Gentle*.

There have been a number of curatorial explorations into the themes of this local discourse, and Roslyn Haynes is but one academic who has written extensively on the process by which European culture has progressively inscribed itself on the landscape through a gradual interweaving of meaning and cultural codification as expressed through art and literature. In her 2006 book, *Tasmanian Visions: Landscapes in Writing, Art and Photography*, Haynes details the perception of place through the pantheon of Tasmanian art, and in her 2004 paper presentation at *Imaging Nature Media Environment and Tourism Conference* she put forward the thesis that the European cultural matrix has been largely born forth from a "*land of absences"*, whereby *"the process of relating to Tasmania imaginatively required a context and the inscription of 'stories' or narratives to provide the place with unique cultural resonances."*[128]

It is strange then, to consider the context of European experience of the local environment as expressed through art as being one of coming to terms with a vacuous lack of a culturally codified sense of place. Instead, I find myself responding through my art practice to a landscape that has never been *other* to me, one where an intrinsic identity with place is fundamental and a given.

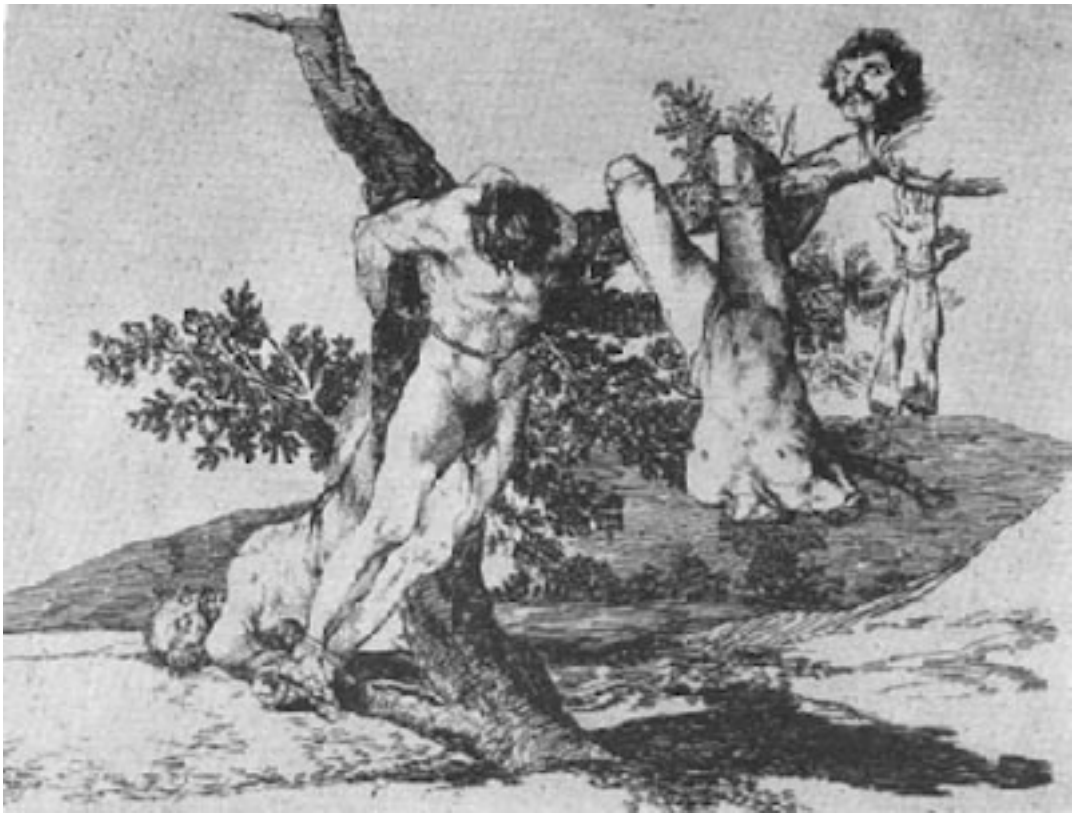
The psychological trajectory of colonialism leading to an ingrained

[128] Haynes, Roslynn. *Inscribing Culture on the Landscape*. Paper presented at Imagining Nature: Media Environment and Tourism, Cradle Mountain, Tasmania, 27-29 June 2004.

identity within place provides the parameters within which my work is grounded. My explorations also seek to explore that which goes much deeper than the façade of European cultural experience and into that of an ingrained indigenous reverberation within the terrain (I am also equally fascinated by a rich primordial unknown, a deeper mystery beyond the reach of Eurocentric historiography), all of which is grounded in the land that I have come to know intimately, and its appeal to my imagination.

While I might consider that my core motivations are not necessarily that of radically readdressing and critiquing the place of Europeans in this country, I must consider it within the context of a greater history of art which does operate on the level of critiquing the notions of *place engagement*. However, despite the scope of work available in this context, the limitations of this paper preclude a review of all of the artists and particular works that I see as relating to this project in any real detail. In light of this, what follows is a discussion of a small selected group of artists, both local and international, who can be seen as forming a context for my research trajectory. The grouping is idiosyncratic to my tastes, interests, technical and aesthetic approach, and what I would see as of core pertinence to my work.

Francisco Goya, *This is Worse!* (Plate 37 of *Disasters of War* series),1810-1820, etching, lavis and drypoint, 15.4 x 20.5cm.



Francisco Goya, *Great Deeds of War! Lives Lost!* (Plate 39 of *Disasters of War* series),1810-1820, etching, lavis and drypoint, 15.4 x 20.5cm.

FRANCISCO GOYA

In the annals of Tasmanian colonial art, save for a few crude drawings of floggings and savage dogs at Eaglehawk Neck, there doesn't seem to be any real artistic depiction of the horrific and gruesome events described in the historical record - but if there were, one could easily imagine such work being on similar footing with that of the Spanish artist Francisco Goya. Goya's oeuvre, most particularly his *Black Paintings* and series of etchings titled *The Disasters of War*, created in the early 19th Century, have had a profound influence on my work as a printmaker. In fact, in many ways I am still weighing up just about everything I do to his work, and his experimental techniques in etching are a constant source of wonderment and intrigue.

In his images, Goya somehow manages to represent brutal and inhumane acts with a tender and empathetic eye that is as brooding and lamenting, as it is humorous and playful. His tragically desperate and desensitized characters, and the matter-of-fact way in which their barbarous acts seem to be carried out, for me, can help imaginatively conjure up something of an analogous idea of human interaction in early Van Diemen's Land. After all, these works were created during roughly the same period in the early 1800's as such atrocities occurred in Tasmania.

In many ways there are aspects of the first thirty years of Van Diemen's Land that can be seen as an incarnation of such atrocious acts as those explicitly represented in the likes of the bleak *Grande hazana! Con muertos!* or the more symbolic *Saturn Devouring His Son*

- which is considered one of the single most horrifying images in the history of painting. I however find this image to be quite ambiguous, because I read it as both plumbing the depths of lamentation on the power and beauty of death and psychotic abject human baseness, as well as being symbolic of the existential grotesque nature of *life* feeding on *life*. Goya's piece, the crazed look in the eye of the devouring wretch seems to speak directly to cultural excess and madness.

Francisco Goya, *Saturn Devouring His Son*, c. 1819-1823.
Oil mural transferred to canvas, 143x81cm.

Mike Parr, *Language and chaos 1*. 1989-90 (detail), full dimensions unknown.

MIKE PARR

When most people think of Mike Parr I'm reasonably sure that the immediate set of imagery that would come to mind would predominately be that of his confrontational body based performance and installation practice. A quick Google search of his name brings one immediately into contact with photographs of his bleeding face grotesquely sewn through with medical stitching-thread running taught lines into his skin as it crisscrosses over the various facial contours, binding his lips and eyes tightly shut, squashing down his nose and pulling his scrunched ears forward, pinning them to the head; his face turned into a contorted, painful caricature.

This familiar imagery is of course from his well-publicized gallery performance entitled *A Stitch in Time, which* took place in Melbourne in 2003, whereby Parr had his eyes and lips sewn together in an artistic act of solidarity and shame towards Australia's treatment of asylum seekers in Detention Centres. Aside from these kinds of bloody and confronting performances, which Parr has been putting himself and his public audience through since the early 70s, he is a printmaker, which has often been seen as a point of contrast in his practice. But

what's startling about this performance footage, slightly distanced from the political topicality of the time, is just how reminiscent the imagery is of Parr's extensive body of work in printmaking and drawing on the subject of the self portrait, in which Parr has figuratively been distorting and mutilating his face for the better part of the past twenty years.

Parr first began making prints in the late 1980s and since that time has predominately made innumerable self portraits, which tend to subvert the tradition into strange and psychologically jarring terrain. Described by him as "*A Field of Death*" (after the 1947 poem by Antonin Artaud entitled *The Human Face*), Parr's self portrait prints appeal to me as being primarily at the forefront of establishing the print as a potent form of psychological expression, which delve deeply into the murky and fragmentary realms of self-examination amid anxieties tied to the mortal flesh of the body. In the press release accompanying a recent survey exhibition of this work at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney titled *Volte Face: Mike Parr Prints & Pre-Prints 1970-2005*, it is asserted that Parr's prints render the self portrait as "unstable, ambiguous terrain".

Mike Parr, *Untitled* (from the series *Self Portraits 1-6 [Red Shift, The Plague]*), Unique state drypoint, 1995. 108x79cm.

These prints are at once anguished and torturous evocations full of facial contortions distorting and disintegrating amidst the plane of the paper surface – seemingly balanced between being and nothingness – constantly being disassembled and reconfigured in a flurry of violent, jagged lines; his subjectivity sometimes gaining moments of clarity; at other times hopelessly lost. Of particular resonance with my own work is the use of the print in multiple form, installed in the gallery setting in composite arrangements, which take on a vastly expansive scale. Parr is perhaps to be considered a master of this approach having created a great body of sophisticated printmaking work in this manner – often times taking entire, and quite lengthy, art gallery walls to present them.

These print clusters often make use of a broad swath of printmaking techniques and a variable range of mark making approaches, often combining relief/ block printing with intaglio, and featuring variations of degrees of layering to each individual print's execution, creating a dialogue between the various panels, and a fluctuating aesthetic density within repetitious arrangements.

Anselm Kiefer, *Varus,* 1976, Oil on canvas. 200 x 270.5cm.

ANSELM KIEFER

The haunting presence of history can saturate a place. In the context as addressing the psychology of history, I have found the work of German painter Anselm Kiefer of particular interest. Kiefer's work reflects a strong sense of lamentation in dealing with the subject of a pervasive sense of history and its haunting affect on people, places and national identity. I relate to the strong elements of his work dealing with myth and the reverberating memory of the past, notably

that of Nazism and the Holocaust's resonance in the German psyche, and the particular landscapes in which such historical events occurred. Kiefer utilises nationalistic motifs, icons and themes such as the tree and forest mythology of German culture, and references to figures of art, the military, literature and philosophers (such as Martin Heidegger) in his work. Kiefer's subject matter, firmly based in myth and history, alludes to the inseparability of past and present in a way that is reminiscent of something writer William Faulkner once wrote, '*the past is never dead. It's not even past*'.[129]

Kiefer's painting of 1976 titled *Varus*, which depicts a dirty-grey snow covered track leading through a dark and brooding forest, is particularly interesting and relevant to what I seek to do with my work. The simple depiction of a snow covered path through the wood upon which there is spattered trail of blood (and a layer of floating, ghostly text), creates a sense of an ominous hidden narrative. Simon Schama said of this work that it appears to be '*a forest that is itself in the tormented throes of Waldsterben*' (forest- death).[130] The landscape is saturated with a sense of the anthropomorphosis of myth, a history of human suffering, and the grim spectre of its own destruction.

[129] Faulkner, William. *Requiem for a Nun*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex : Penguin in association with Chatto & Windus, 1960. p.18.
[130] Schama, Simon. *Landscape and Memory*. London : Fontana Press, 1996. p.120.

Georg Baselitz, *Untitled*, Woodcut, 1967

GEORG BASELITZ

There is a colour scheme in some of the early Baselitz paintings of muted pale flesh-tones amid earthy and dense backgrounds conjured with thick and expressive oil paint seemingly pushed and scraped over the surface of the canvas, to form vivid and expressive moments of strange grotesquery captured under violent light. Something of this sense of expressivity informs the way in which I might apply and manipulate ink on my printing plates. Baselitz's weirdly allegorical figures hark back to psychological archetypes and symbols of his own

German national identity and history, with his paintings and prints often taking on an iconoclastic and black-humoured approach to the subject matter.

I interpret Baselitz's work as an examination of historical and psychological totems – of the soldier, the forest, the eagle – potent symbols dredged up from the midst of his country's mythology. Put into the context of a present day reading, this imagery would seem to be steeped in a sense of cultural identity and the psychological relationship with the past affecting the contemporary psyche. This reading of his work informs part of my approach to Tasmanian history. Baselitz's technique in printmaking, particularly that of the jagged expressivity of woodcut, and his extensive forays into etching, is also of interest as he often employs the use of layering to conjure a sense of drama and density in the work.

MANDY MARTIN

Mandy Martin's series of paintings *Absence and Presence*, which were made in collaboration with Wiradjuri artist Trisha Carroll in 2004, combine two overlapping layers of representation – one a Western interpretation of landscape, and the other indigenous Australian – to gel two vastly different *cultural* perspectives as one. Martin describes these paintings as being '*about inspirited places around where I live on the central west, NSW*'.[131] One of these works, *Haunted 2*, is a favourite of mine and also a piece that employs multiple panels in a panoramic composition, and a title that I find to be suggestive of

[131] Grishin, Sasha. 'Mandy Martin - Absence and Presence (with collaborative works between Mandy Martin and Trisha Carroll)'. *Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery*, 2004. Accessed November 21st, 2012, http://.roslynoxley9.com.au/news/releases/2004/11/18/83/

landscape memory, and a sombre, yearning reflection on the very *emptiness* of the landscape in the wake of the displacement of the traditional inhabitants of the land. The eighteen works in the *Absence and Presence* series are strongly concerned with myth, history and the environment, particularly with the layers of meaning that are both inherent to, and culturally inscribed in the landscape. I find this work contains the spectre of a succession of absences (most notably that of its traditional inhabitants), and the way in which the reverberation of presence in the past has the power to affect contemporary experience of place.

Mandy Martin and Trisha Carroll, *Haunted 2*, 2004, Ochre, pigment, oil on linen, 244x 675cm.

Jorg Schmeisser, *Face above the West Gate of Angkor Thom,* 1999. Etching. 31x40cm.

JORG SCHMEISSER

I first encountered to work of German printmaker Jorg Schmeisser during the early stages of my undergraduate degree, when he was Artist in Residence at the Tasmanian School of Art in 2001. During this time Jorg conducted a number of workshops in the printmaking department, and was generally on hand working on his own prints and giving students advice with their work. I was lucky enough to take a good deal of information and inspiration away from this time, learning firsthand some of the technicalities of multi-plate, colour etching from Jorg who was an internationally renowned consummate master of the medium. Particularly I gained an overview and base knowledge of the technical processes involved where colour and tonal combinations are affected and altered by one other through multiple passes through the press, and the role of ink viscosity in producing a successful print that

has been layered in this way.

Though Jorg had an exact method of interlocking plates, my approach has been to develop an experimental approach to layering in a much looser way, though out of a grounding in the more *scientific* approach that Jorg employed. The level of careful and delicate detail with which his works are imbued, and his naturalist, almost diaristic approach to his subjects, be they rock formations, shells, icebergs, or the overgrown ruins of ancient structures such as those of Angkor Thom in Cambodia, reinforce a distinct notion in my mind of the artist as being capable of conducting a kind of idiosyncratic survey of a place – that is to conduct a kind of experiential mapping on par with other forms of science. Certainly his depictions of the ruins of Angkor offer a detailed perspective that speak of time and culture on a deeply detailed level resonant through both subject and process; they strike me as picture essays of reports from the field. Jorg was like a modern anthropologist mapping his experience.

Raymond Arnold, *Western Mountains 1984-2004*, coloured etching on paper. Triptych: each sheet 120x 40cm.

Raymond Arnold and Ian Westacott, *Mt Field Ghost Gums 2003*, etching on paper, exact dimensions unknown.

RAYMOND ARNOLD

Fellow printmaker, and my former teacher, Raymond Arnold's large scale multi-plate etchings of Tasmanian mountain rock-faces made in the mid eighties such as *Western Mountains, 1984-2004* are at once exquisitely detailed, terribly beautiful and sublimely grotesque depictions of landscape which seem to suggest a strong meditation on the psychology of encounter. The weight and density of their primordial appearance situate these prints firmly in the realm of the Tasmanian Gothic, as they seem to be imbued with the fundamental struggle between light and dark, positive and negative: life and death (and progress vs preservation). I personally find the incredible amount of detail in these plates almost dizzying. The stark clarity of the *Western Mountains* triptych has the affect of being both astonishing, and an inducement of an almost *existential grotesque*. The way in which Arnold has wiped the printing plates allowing the print to be representative of the ephemeral nature of weather, and its interplay with the more solid and static forms of the mountain face and scree field. There is a fragmentation of light and time between the panels; on the left-hand panel wispy dark clouds appear evident in the plate tone. The central and right-hand panels contain dense and impenetrable shadowy clouds that obscure the summit of the mountain, and seem to embody the very enigma of weather, as a powerful and potentially threatening force that is beyond the control of man. Arnold has also printed the various states of these plates as they were developed, creating a form of time-lapse etching.

Mt Field Ghost Gums is a two-plate colour etching produced by Raymond Arnold in collaboration with Ian Westacott in 2003. Each

created a plate of the elegantly twisted snow gum forests of Mt Field, which have subsequently been layered together, as two perspectives within the same image.[132] The dark green ink used, coupled with the use of expressive wiping conjures up the atmosphere of the forest to great affect. The combination of two different artists perspectives sandwiched together speaks eloquently on the way in which human experience is peculiarly subjective to each individual, and how each individual's experience of a place is affected by his or her own personal idiosyncrasies.

In 1994 Arnold made the following statement about his artworks, which I can relate to strongly in terms of my own work:

"*My artworks, with their emphasis on the environment, develop referential trajectories through colonial histories to the events in my studio in the present time. Within this curving geometry they exist at once as nostalgic echoes and symbols of loss and wishful reclaiming*".[133]

[132] Thow, Penny. "Prints Come to Life". *Sunday Tasmanian*, Aug 24, 2005.
[133] Kirker, Anne. "Reciprocal Terrains: Ray Arnold in the 1990s", *Art & Australia* vol. 36, no. 1. 1998. p.76.

Michael Schlitz, *"Rootstock"*, 1997-98.

MICHAEL SCHLITZ

Michel Schlitz is an enigma. His works are infused with a sense of playful naivety yet at the same time appear to hover forth out of some dense poetic chasm filled with heavy thoughts of nature, history and environment. Although he has shifted to a primary focus on the woodcut in recent years, his series of intaglio prints created between 2004 and 2006 entitled *The Language of the Mute*, bear a particular resonance with my own project.

In this body of work, Schlitz reconstructs a series of images out of fragmentary composites sourced from a single primary image; the 18th century engraving of Jacques-Etienne Victor Arago, *Premiere Entrevue avec les Sauvages*, an image depicting the meeting between some

French colonial expeditioners and an Aboriginal tribe on the west coast of Australia in 1818. Out of this source image Schlitz used a process of photocopy and collage to create new images through a photo-etching technique, a number of which take on the formation of trees built out of a flurry of human limbs.

Schlitz described the work as being in part a meditation on seeing the past within the present, and an examination of his own experience of history and place; *"It is possible"* he tells us, *"to reflect on these works which communicate unconscious and subtle agendas through gesture and multiple narratives. These narratives importantly construct a mirror for our history. A mirror which reflects on our past and our ability to empathize with it and which is essential for understanding our history and also our present."*[134]

In blowing up the original information of Desarc's engravings to the point almost verging on disintegration, Schlitz has naturally rendered the composite pieces as high-contrast semi-distorted facsimiles, thus there is a strong sense of the interplay between light and shadow in the prints, something that Schlitz himself remarks on in his writing on the work; "*there can be no light without shadow*" he says, before making cryptic reference to Iain Chambers in *The Post Colonial Question*; "*History has its dimension of the unexplorable, at the edge of which we wander, our eyes wide open.*"[135]

Pertinent to my explorations in print, the anthropomorphic renderings of trees present an intriguing image. Schlitz also employs the strategy

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[134] Schlitz, Michael. "The Language of the Mute: A Visual Interrogation of Arago's image *Baie des Chiens-marins, presqu'ile Peron. Entrevue avec les Sauvages*". MFA Thesis, University of Tasmania, 2000. p. 60.
[135] Ibid. p.p. 60-61.

of installing print-clusters on the gallery wall as a composite of individual prints in poetic arrangements, and utilized a subtle multi-plate layering process and drenching of loose ink to infuse the paper with a dense richness. There is also the playful manner in which these depictions verge on abstract allegory and muted fable, and Schlitz's assertion that they can dualistically be considered as a '*reflected autobiography*' that I can identify strongly with[136]. Schlitz work hints at the contemplation of validity of being in place in light of troubled history, toys with the absurdity of colonialist impositions, and offers his musings as subtly comical yet eloquently haunted vignettes.

Michael Schlitz, *Language of the Mute series*, 1997-98.

[136] Ibid. Abstract. p. iv.

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Outside of the themes and local subject matter of my practice, it's important to note that I see my work as operating within the context of contemporary international art. There are currently a number of singular artists, collaborations and collective presses operating outside of Australia that I look to as producing exciting new work in this domain. The increasing prevalence of printmaking blogs and other websites have become important for staying informed about practice currently taking place, and it is in this realm that I find a great sense of kinship among current fellow practitioners of printmaking.

What is perhaps most interesting to me is finding that many current artists associated with a printmaking practice are working in many ways outside of the traditional norms of simply printing onto paper with a press, and are instead utilizing various printmaking processes in a more hybridized, lateral way, that is increasingly leading to a certain state of flux in regards to changing definitions of what defines a printmaking practice. Using printing plates and blocks as a sculptural element of the presentation of work, employing installation configurations, and creating experimental unique state prints with little regard for editioning potential are some of the ways that this is occurring. Such ideas and attitudes are certainly part of the make up to my own philosophy of practice – that printmaking needn't be *pure* printmaking to be printmaking anymore – but can be combined and hybridized in any number of ways.

THOMAS KILPPER

German artist Thomas Kilpper has taken printmaking out of the print studio, and into old decrepit and condemned buildings. Using printmaking in part in an activist, and sometimes-illegal manner, Kilpper has gained notoriety for breaking into buildings earmarked for either demolition or redevelopment and carving enormous woodcuts directly into the wooden floors. While he inks up these floors, and makes prints from them (often taking the form of huge banners), both the act of creating them, and the 'floor cuttings' themselves, are a potent form of site specific practice. That the floor matrix will often be destroyed is significant to the fact that the work is about the destruction of urban history, with the imagery often being depictions of events surrounding the history of the particular buildings they are carved into. On his practice Kilpper has said:

> *"I love to take odd looking or smelly derelict houses. In the eighties I did some years of squatting, and it was exactly that same feeling of "conquering" something that is considered worthless for others, but that could mean so much to you. Vacancy is a widespread byproduct of our economy and as such, vacant space somehow becomes semi-public: it is privately-owned, but publicly neglected. At the same time it is an opportunity to get space for free or for cheap. I always find it interesting to do projects aside from the art-institutions. Right away, the projects are not just stuck inside an ivory tower, but instead try to communicate unprotected with people*

in society who are not museum-goers."[137]

The scale of Killper's works is often astounding, as he has been known to print the floor from entire levels of a building, and then hang the print from the outside of the building, such is the case with The Ring, a work made in 2000 in the Orbit Building, London (figure #).

Thomas Kilpper, *The Ring,* 2000. View of the banner installed on the facade of the Orbit building, London.

ORIT HOFSHI

Another artist working mainly in the medium in contemporary woodcut is Israeli artist Orit Hofshi, who creates quite large-scale pieces out of a composite combination of printed sheets of paper and the carved

[137] J.Roca. *Interview: Thomas Kilpper*. Printagrapfika blogspot. Accessed November 26th, 2012, http://philagrafika.blogspot.com.au/2009/07/interview-thomas-kilpper.html

Orit Hofshi "*datum collectanea"* Woodblock, drawing, carving. 427.2" X 105.6" / 1085cm x 268cm

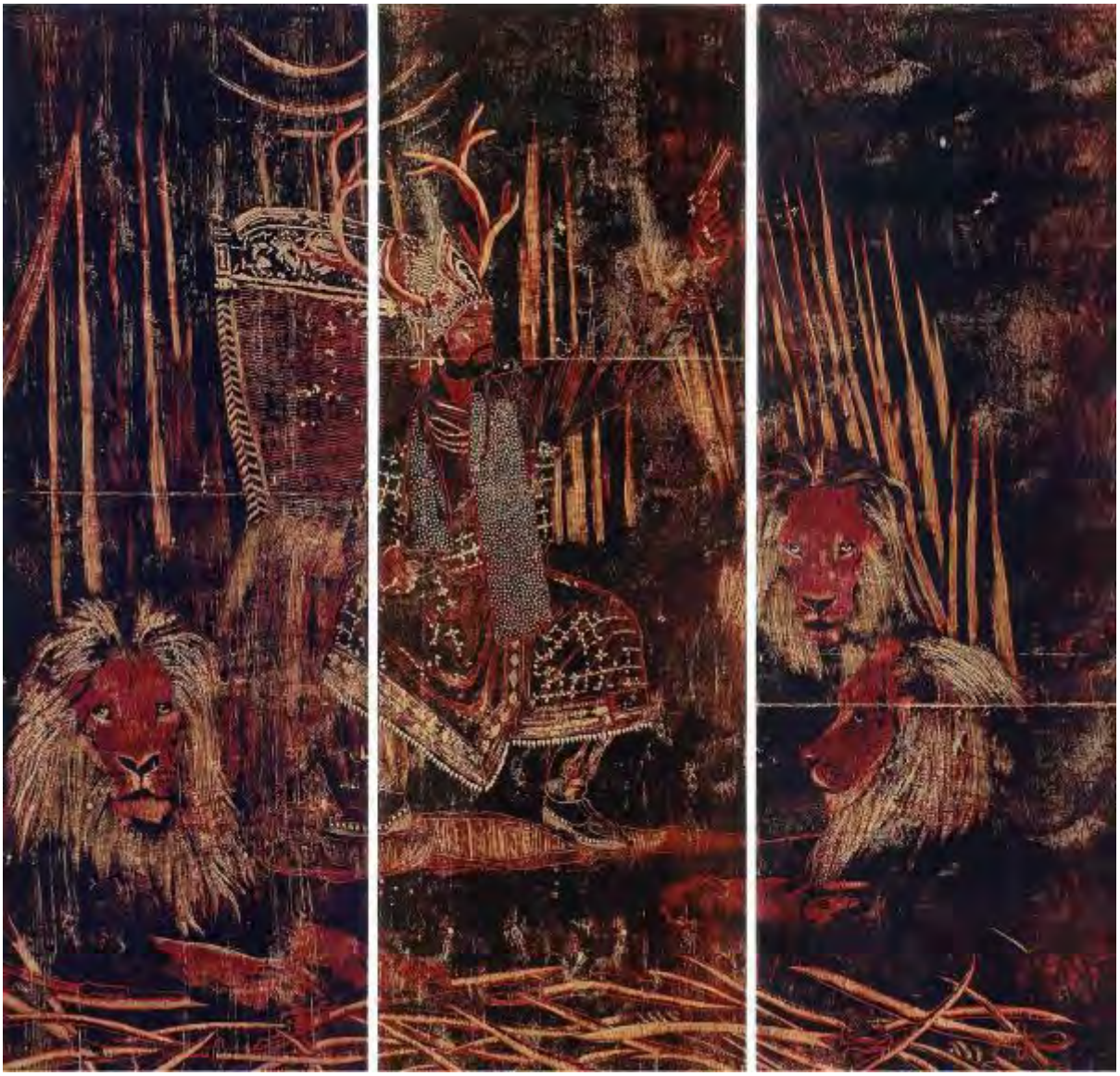
wooden blocks of the print matrix. Landscapes appear as a prominent subject of her work: a 2005 piece, *Datum Collectanea*, is a wonderful example of this. A work that eschews paper altogether in favor of carved, inked, and drawn pine sheets, *Datum Collectanea* depicts a vast expanse of jangled foreshore rocks giving way to the distant void of ocean fused to the sky, as distant figures wander in single file towards an indeterminate horizon. Hofshi has pointed to Simon Schama's *Landscape and Memory* in alluding to her interest in landscapes as historical and cultural saturated subjects[138]:

> *"There was, I knew, blood beneath the verdure and tombs in the deep glades of oak and fir. The fields, forests and rivers had seen war and terror, elation and desperation; death and resurrection … It is a haunted land where greatcoat buttons from six generations of fallen soldiers can be discovered lying amidst the woodland ferns."*[140]

PRATHAP MODI

Young Indian artist Prathap Modi, who creates large woodcut pieces, sometimes as painted print matrixes, and sometimes as traditional prints on paper, is another artist pushing printmaking in terms of scale and technique. One of a number of artists emerging recently from the graphics department of Andhra University, Visakhapatnam (a port city on the southeast coast of India, with a thriving printmaking

[138] J.Roca, *Interview: Orit Hofshi*, Printagrapfika blogspot. Accessed November 26th, 2012, http://philagrafika.blogspot.com.au/2009/03/interview-orit-hofshi.html
[140] Schama, Simon. *Landscape and Memory*. London : Fontana Press, 1996. p. 24.



Prathap Modi: "*Too Much of Anything is Good for Nothing - (2)",* woodcut on three sheets of paper, 2009, 213 x 312 cm.

department[142]), Modi is a gold medalist at the Masters level. His work presents a vivid evocation of themes of desire, identity, and social concern, and have been described by *The Hindu* arts writer Swafti Daftuar as "idealised, *iconographic portraits of men and animals",* through which "it *is clear that … he intends to show peaceful coexistence and a more unified world"*[144]*.* Modi's works often depict himself, under the guise of various personas representing divisions in social and class order, which seems to suggest a desire to undermine such divisions.

Modi's large-scale woodcut piece of 2009, *Too Much of Anything is Good for Nothing 2*, which depicts the artist as throned royalty sitting abreast of three lions, firing a revolver into the air, complete with an antlered crown, is a good example of his particular style of tongue in cheek social commentary. Impressive in their technical virtuosity and sheer scale, Modi's prints are extensively layered, and being too large for the press, are printed by hand. The artist can be seen in a YouTube video documenting the printing of one his massive four panel multilayered works, kneeling on the back of the paper and printing with a spoon.[145]

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[142] Lina Vincent Sunish, *Printer as Pedagogue: T. Sudhakar Reddy inspires the young and the rural at Andhra University*. Artetc. Website. Accessed November 26th, 2012, http://www.artnewsnviews.com/view-article.php?article=printer-as-pedagogue&iid=24&articleid=622

[144] Swafti Daftuar, *Carve and Create,* The Hindu newspaper website. Accessed November 26th, 2012, http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-features/tp-fridayreview/carve-and-create/article1820206.ece

[145] Prathap Modi, *The Making of 'We Will Be Together'*.Youtube Inc. Accessed November 26th, 2012, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VvTFUslr6po

In summary, the group of artists discussed here should be seen to echo and inform the various interwoven aspects of my practice throughout this project. From the naturalist-like enquiry of Jorg Schmeisser, to the ambiguous psychological terrain of Mike Parr, to Thomas Kilpper's grunge like approach of printing the floors of dilapidated buildings, there is a sense that my work can build on the various subtle levels of these artists, developing its own idiosyncratic visual language.

Chapter 5. How the project was pursued:

Straddling the Great Void of Forgotten Memory and Unwritten History

I had come into the country of the northwestern corner of Arthurs Lakes as the dusk light was fading and set up camp amongst the wooded edge of an open grassland. I lit a fresh campfire in the small circle of stones and charcoal which seemingly lay in wait for this purpose, and as the light from the sun slowly faded completely, I watched the Tasman blue sky reflecting iridescent on the glowing surface of the lake through the silhouetted gum trees gradually shift to moonlight as I cooked my dinner on the open coals. The possums and other nocturnal animals awoke and rustled through the trees, screeching and yowling territorially into the distance, and the Mopoke Owl faintly hooted somewhere over the plain, as I nestled to sleep in a feather leaking sleeping bag, safe inside my tent.

The temperature of what was a clear and mild spring day soon plummeted to a pervasive dull iciness, and my sleep was not altogether sound as I awoke and shifted frequently in the nocturnal freeze. The sound of a sinewed wind rose and roared across the lake and through the trees like a dark ocean, as the tent shuddered and flapped to its persistent malevolent rhythm, and I dreamt of a vast bright light outstretched at the end of the now translucent tent, trying to communicate something intangible, but perhaps just wanting its presence to be known. In the morning I rose to a dull dirty silver sky,

a lone fly-fisher on the lake, and nothing of the forest of Cider Gum trees that Robinson described in sight.

As I walked around the landscape that Robinson and the Friendly Mission had visited in 1831, I found myself overcome by a dull sense of loss. The place seemed transformed and degraded, desolate - something fundamental to its essence seemed to be missing. There is an odd sense of placelessness in the area arising perhaps in part from the lands falling under control of the ambiguous tenure of the Hydro Electric Commission and it being utilized as common ground, but perhaps more to do with the fact that what was once both a unique sight for the endemic Cider Gum tree and a key sight of cultural significance to the Lairmairrener people, had been largely erased and drowned under the rising waters of the Hydro lake. While there are still some Cider Gums remaining, they are few – many seemingly destroyed in a fire at Tumbledown Creek, and a small number still survive around the present day campsites nestled amongst the recesses of the once much larger grassy wooded plain that sits around the north-western shoreline of what is now known as Cowpaddock Bay.

Somewhere further down the mouth of the bay between The Opening and Hawke Island, beneath the high-voltage power-lines that straddle the watery divide like ominous monolithic robots from nineteen fifties science fiction, lays the original shoreline - drowned under the twenty meter raising of the lake level. And somewhere, submerged under the silver waters, is the place where Robinson described the forest of the Cider Gums and village of native huts.

It's a perplexing and heartrending proposition to ponder the place in light of this history. Here, beneath the broken outcrop of Brady's Lookout, the values and meanings of the past seem to have been replaced by a culture that while still settling down to camp in the same sheltered western edges of the lakeside plains, occupies the area purely for a type of implanted recreation. Of four-wheel driving or wading in the icy waters - to fish for an introduced species in a transformed lake, where it is common to shoot the native wildlife for sport or dog meat, and leave fire singed mixer-drink cans to incinerate in the common hearth.[146]

Early Work and Initial Experimentation

At the beginning of this research trajectory, I had the intention to explore a hybridity of digital and traditional printmaking techniques and to combine time-based video with printmaking, and further to that; to create a body of work that would make use of the various mediums that I have worked with previous to this project. The work that I developed in the preliminary stages amounted to explorations in video and digital imaging of photo composites, which I intended to eventually combine with the traditional processes of etching and monoprint.

After exhibiting some of this work in 2008 at Arts Alive in Launceston at a two person show with new media artist Samuel Eddy entitled, *Subterranean Tasmania*, as well as another of the works being

[146] Author's notes from a fieldtrip to the Plateau.

Damon Bird, *Untitled*, digital image, 2008, dimensions variable.

exhibited at a group show at local ARI, Inflight the same year, I ultimately did not continue to produce this kind of work in the overtly digital realm. Instead, I further developed my traditional printmaking plates, which carried on formally from these initial experimentations in composite image making and multi-layering, but in a much more organic and expressive way. The main problem that I found with working in the realm of the photo-based digital media was that I always felt removed from the finished work, in that I was unable to invest in it the kind of expressivity and emotional potency that I feel that I was capable of within the more 'hand-made' processes of drawing directly, and printing with ink and paper on the etching press. I now see the digital work that I produced early on essentially as sketches for the prints that I would later produce.

Along with the digital imaging and video experiments, I also made inroads in painting. These used similar preliminary process to my printmaking in that they were built up as translations of photographic information via the projected slide, and were then executed through a layering of translucent paint made out of a mixture of pigment, PVA glue and water. Perhaps the most realized of these initial works is the diptych nicknamed Great Lake Burl. My intention with this work was to carry it through to an oil paint stage with a layering which I'd imagined would be similar in effect to the wiping of the ink on my printmaking plates. I hoped this would infuse the paintings with a greater richness, atmospheric density, and subtle layering, but the work was abandoned before this stage was completed.

Damon Bird, *Great Lake Burl*, Mixed media on plywood, 2008-2009.

As they are, I think these unfinished paintings are roughly on par with the raw metal printing plates – they contain the raw, graphic information but are lacking in the expressive qualities of the more successful etchings. It was under the advice of my supervisors David Stephenson and Milan Milojevic that I considered that while these initial experiments had merit, they were somewhat lacking in the sophistication of visual language that the printmaking work was able to convey.

An Indelible Experience Translated

When I am exploring a place I tend to document my movement through it and the things that I see rapidly with an excess of still photographs. I take film slides with a Nikon FM 35mm SLR, which are rarer, more considered compositions, while with the image capture function of my trusty old DV tape video recorder I shoot indiscriminately from the hip wherever I see something as a kind of landmark, or holding a significance (even in the most minor way) to my thinking whilst traversing through the landscape. Invariably I end up with a ridiculous amount of poor quality jpegs documenting my journey, from which I review and select the images that I draw from.

The Cider Gum prints that I've produced are sourced from almost two months of searching, traversing the muddy landscape, finding stone ruins of huts and fences, Aboriginal artefacts scattered amongst broken beer bottles and rusted tin detritus on the shores of the Great Lake, walking through frozen rivers or sitting upon an icy hill painting with frozen fingers *en plein air* between showers of snow. The shots captured one afternoon upon realizing that the Cider Gums that were right under my nose, record an epiphany – a moment of breaking through the unremarkable veneer veiling the remarkable way things can become, and be experienced, when the thinking, and thus visual perspective, is altered through the knowledge of its historical context.

My practical research has amounted to transcribing something of the engaged experience of standing beneath the swirling trunks of the Cider Gum tree, and finding myself in a field of symbolic ruins. These

arboreal forms hovered above like an expanse of bleached skeletal sculptures so fragile that the bleak Miena wind threatened, like a breath of death, to undermine and collapse them into the bowels of lost history at any moment[147]. I could see in the vast writhing forms an echo of the twisted bodies cast from the ash of Vesuvius, monstrous faces screaming in agony reminiscent of Bernini's *Soul Condemned to Hell*[148], bizarre malformed torsos and headless midriffs with grotesque tumescent appendages, caught in a frozen storm of far flung serpentine limbs and sensuous, carnal bodily entanglements. To my mind it was like witnessing firsthand the visual equivalent of Ingres's *Turkish Bath,* in a state of metamorphosis with some kind Goyaesque/Boschian nightmare in the form of a three-dimensional deformed Baroque ceiling painting – and all of this inscribed and indelibly tattooed with the invisible ink of the place's idiosyncratic past.

When I drive by the Shannon River I can't help but be reminded of such things as Michael Howe's skull being bashed in with the butt of a rifle, brains and blood seeping into the soil of the riverbank. I look out across St. Patrick's plains and see the empty space that once housed the small village of Aboriginal huts described by Ross, Jorgenson and Robinson. I look out over the Great Lake, and can't help but imagine it before it was damned, and so see only a submerged history hidden beneath the murky waters, of a culture thriving, villages and industry taking place along the submerged native shoreline.

[147] Indeed at one point while I was underneath one tree photographing it, a nearby tree half collapsed and shattered on the ground.
[148] Anima Dannata - or *Damned Soul*, as it is also known.

When it comes to the job of transcribing such an experiential representation of place, I have persisted with the print as the singular medium through which to pursue this project Within this medium I have gradually developed a system of repetition and layering that allows for the core of the subject to be conveyed through the aesthetic of the printed surface. Through the alchemy of the print, the transformative entanglements of bleached dead limbs are reassembled into an image intended to communicate something of the essence of their significance as potent cultural artefacts. Every line reflects the path of the engraving implements – gouged, scraped, sanded, and mechanically indented into the surface of the plate and implanted through ink and the forced pressure of the press into a new context that is forged into the paper, where the lines take on the appearance of aged tattoos bleeding into the surface skin on which they are inscribed.

Throughout this process of reconstructing the experiential representation of place, I find myself grappling with a dense and turbulent psychological expression of multifarious complexity, and it is perhaps important to note that the work has been more crucially tackled psychologically and emotionally before it has been reasoned. It is a personal experience of place that I ultimately depict, which puts the work in the realms of representation of subjective reality (but within that it is hoped a universal resonance may be struck). And in my reading, there is a layering of time and history interwoven on every surface - the transient trajectories of multiple perspectives exist

imaginatively as tattooed spectral ghost images of deep seeded stories interwoven with the terrain.[149]

Although my interest and thus way of looking/representing has been centred on these vast human webs within the landscape, in the initial stages of the project I made the decision that I wasn't going to use any literal depiction of this past human network, be it either through working with existing portraits or using text. I was looking to express something a little more abstract, in the psychological essence of the experience. And so the basic imagery that I worked with has all come directly from what I had experienced with my own two eyes (as recorded with the mechanical eye of the camera). Instead of the obvious thing of using an overlay of text or portraiture (which I have done in the past with my prints, and experimented with in early digital works) I have used the tree forms in an allegorical way to denote the multiplicity of time and experience, layered on top of itself.

The content of the work is echoed in the form, which contains a distinctly anthropomorphic subtext. Any and all bodily similarities I have found perfectly formed, and I have endeavoured not to embellish or exaggerate – the experiential perspective remains as close as possible to my actual reality of experiencing it. In terms of the drawn detail, layering and tonal adjustments are intended to translate both the emotional and psychological engagement, and a representation of the layered processes of time and experience as per the multifarious character of the human landscape. As I see these trees as being

[149] On a least one level in this regard, I see some of the processes involved in the works development as being akin to a form of abstracted cultural and experiential survey of the place.

situated fundamentally within the cultural ecology of the place in which they are rooted, and having a rich history of human interaction from varied cultural groups, it is also of significant interest that they are among the most naturally anthropomorphic trees that I have encountered.

This anthropomorphism saturates my prints, through which I have imaginatively taken it to poetically represent a poignant reminder of the embeddedness of past narratives interwoven with the landscape (swirling serpentine limbs like frozen moments in a divine comedy of Vandiemonian proportions), and within this I see a certain intimacy revealed. It's not all harrowing and dramatic bleakness and dark Tasmanian Gothic horror. There is also playfulness, tenderness and sensuality in the use of line in the drawing of the imagery, albeit so intermingled with the grotesquery of mottled knots and bizarrely contorted protrusions. I want to reclaim these hybrid conglomerations as potent symbols of the human landscape, indicative of my own Vandiemonian expression of a place of saturated with the richness of hybridized culture.[150]

In the metaphoric possibilities of the tree itself, I also take a similar approach to that expressed by Michael Schlitz;

> "*I am aware of how selective history is and how perceptions of history are shaped by certain events. The things I see are usually supported by the strength of the structure I do*

[150] Vandiemonianism as I have understood it from Peter Hay and James Boyce represents a richness in hybrid culture – and indigenizing of the European into a state of mixed identity; an identity that is fundamentally tied to place.

not see. For me this is very much like the roots of a tree. The tree is a metaphor for history. The branches and the roots are two similar systems. One is visible and the other is usually invisible. Similarly, history is both seen and unseen."[151]

The trees in my work do represent more than just trees. They are allegories for the deeper significance of place on the human psyche, and elegiac expressions of an empathetic engagement with that which has been imaginatively reclaimed from the verge of the abyssal void of lost memory and unwritten history. They are the very totemic ruins of cultural memory, and the reflection of self within place. They are the fleeting fragments of lived moments, of lives fluttering before apocalypse, of time fleeting before the shadows of a momentary existence. They are the frozen psychological entombments of human heritage in the environment.

As a printmaker, I am able to engage imaginatively with the repeated process of visitation and engagement with the same location sequentially through the readiness of the medium to take advantage of the multiple. Prints are created again and again in variation from one another to make explicit the changes in time and environmental conditions and the multiplicity of place engagement and historical layering. Although here are passages of gnarled trees reminiscent of a monstrous screaming face, and sections that echo a more serene and sensuous flow of entangled bodies, I tend to think of one continuous

[151] Schlitz, Michael. "The Language of the Mute: A Visual Interrogation of Arago's image *Baie des Chiens-marins, presqu'ile Peron. Entrevue avec les Sauvages*". MFA Thesis, University of Tasmania, 2000. p. 23.

evolving conglomeration, where the sum of individual parts are the makings of the greater installation.

The nature of this installation I have envisioned to encompass a sense of the repetition and flow, not dissimilar to a movement of musical notation. I have been inspired in this regard by many of the contemporary artists who use both printmaking and other means in composite or installation configurations such as *Mike Parr, Immants Tillers* and *Orit Hofshi*[152]. I imagine the combined effect of the work to almost be something like a Rothko Chapel-esque Arboretum. And also, I have loosely been informed in a structural sense by Robinson's description of the Aboriginal Chief Eumarrah using song as a form of storytelling that connects with a specific cultural history within the Tasmanian landscape – *a song interwoven with country*. Robinson tells us that around the campfire, Eumarrah would entertain his companions:

> *"by telling them stories every night, many of them so long as to take upwards of an hour in reciting, keeping them awake listening to his relation until twelve or one o'clock. The manner of relating these stories is by singing them, each verse ending in a chorus, and consist of long journeys or travels with their various adventures, of amorous adventures, exploits in war etc."*[153]

[152] Particular works of interest being Orit Hofshi's *Datum Collectanea*, 2005, Immants Tillers *Kangaroo Blank*, 1988, Mike Parr, *The Rest of Time (In Memory of My father, Geoffry Edwin Parr, 1909-1998)*, 1988.
[153] Robinson, George Augustus. *Friendly Mission: The Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson 1829-1834. Edited by NJB Plomley*.

Through the installation approach I feel that I can represent something about the fragmented, non-linear narrative of experience and cultural saturation in place through the presentation of the work as a kind of abstract visual song – with each sheet of paper containing varying degrees of layering and density, business of line, space and tone conjured through mark making and the colour of the ink. As a *visual language* the work may be fairly dense, with the repeated entanglements of the twisted arboreal limbs denoting something of its lyrical or poetic intentions.

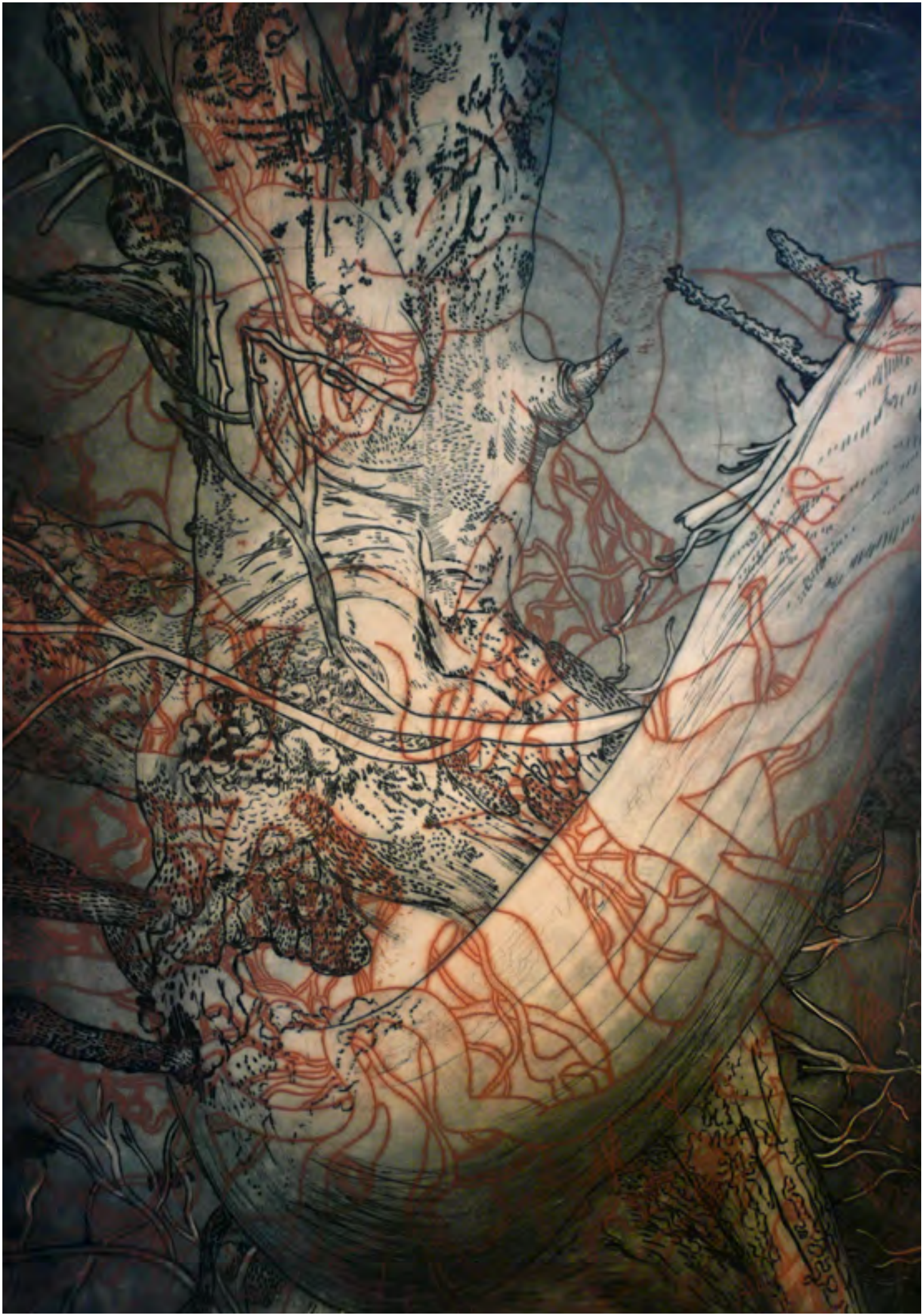
I want the work to in a sense sing with its own warbled tones bloated with the invested sense of the human and environmental divine comedy, analogous to the words of Dante in his *Inferno*, or those of John Milton in *Paradise Lost*.

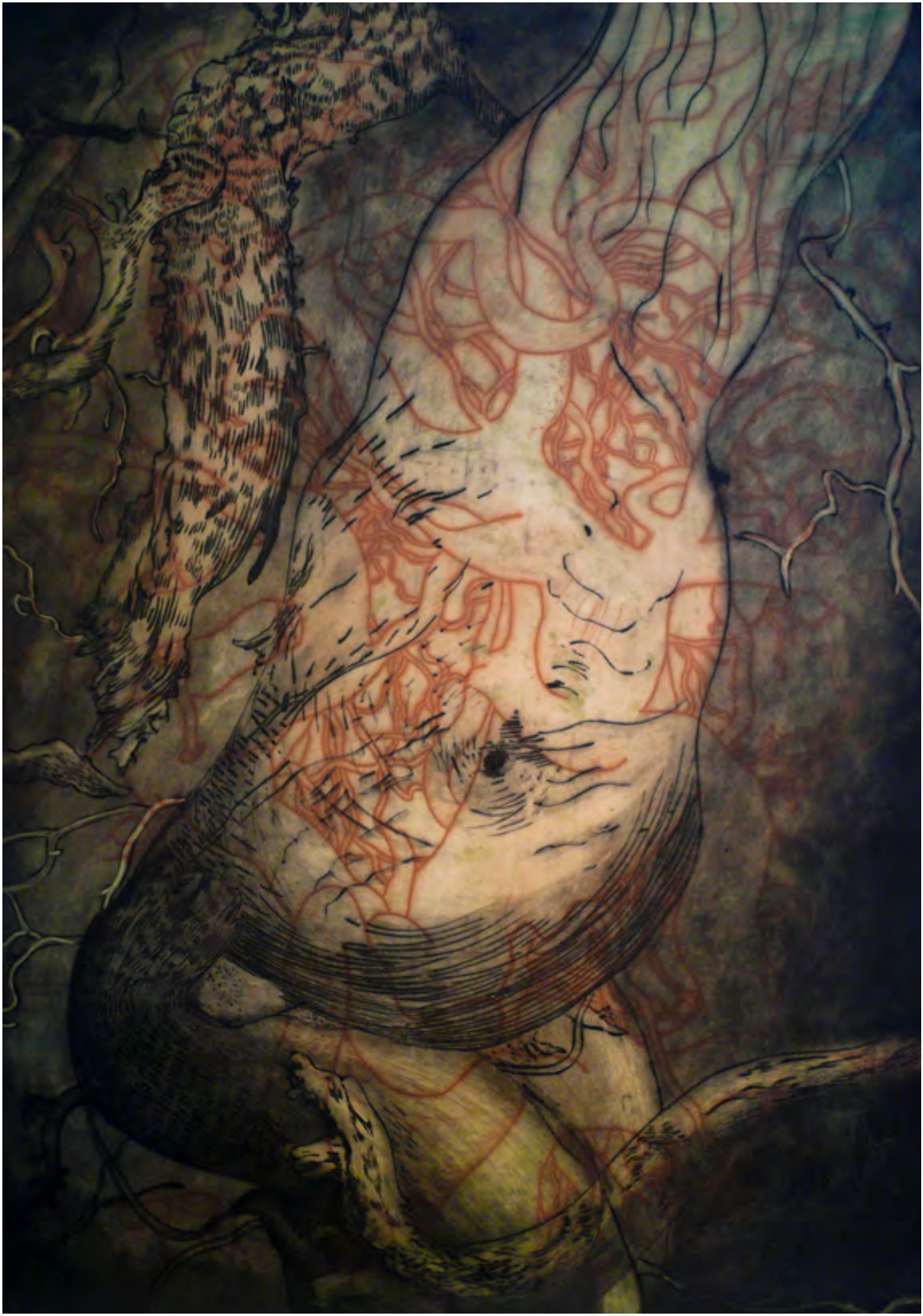
Launceston, Tas, : Queen Victoria Museum And Art Gallery ; Hobart, Tas. : Quintus Publishing, 2008. p. 528.

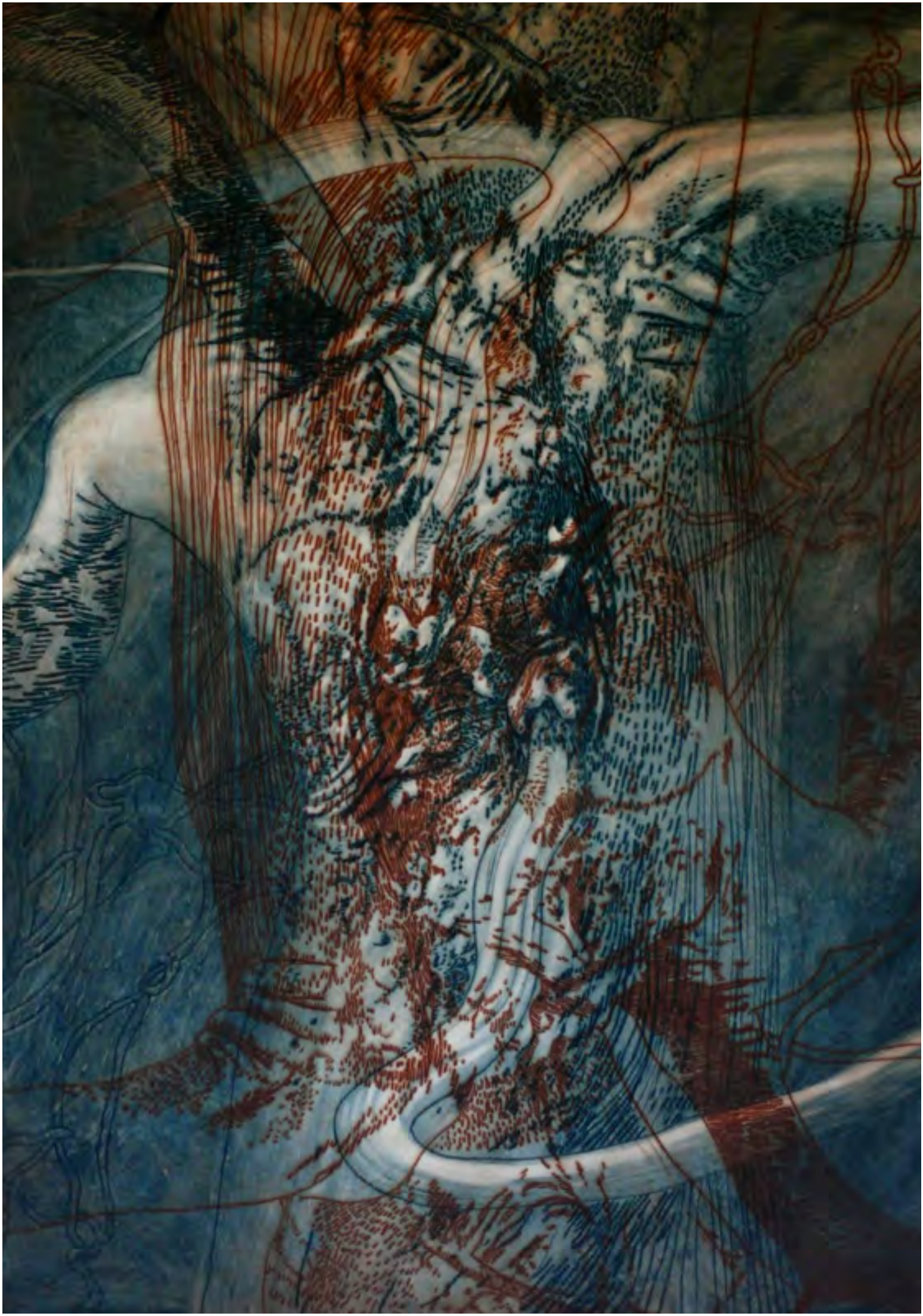
Gunnii Prints

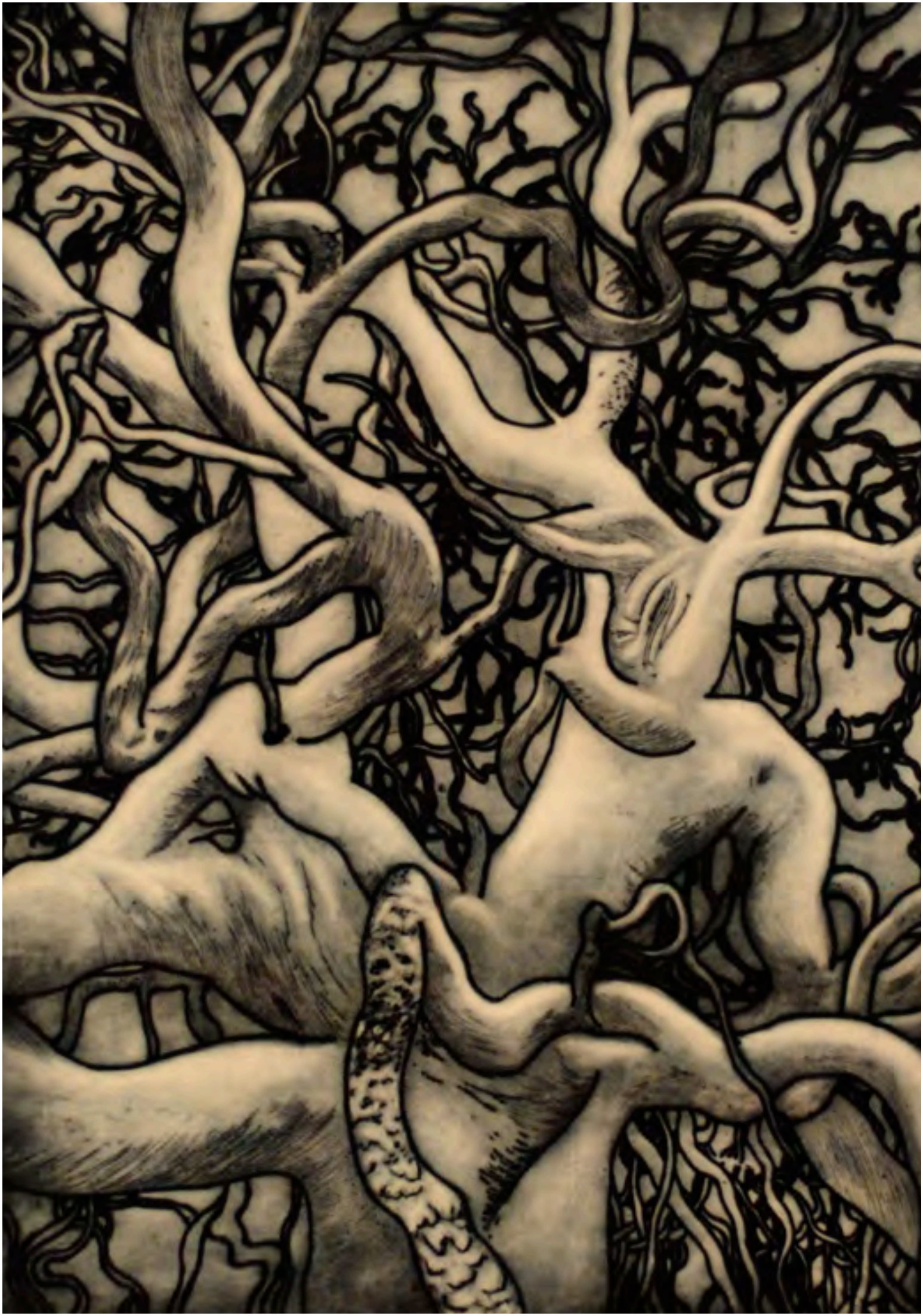
Due to the nature of these prints existing as a conglomerate body of work on the same subject and as formal variations within the same plate dimensions, they can be seen as a community of interrelated works existing together as a whole. As such they are best depicted as a group. Each and all go under the title of 'Gunnii'. Following is condensed selection of the works; each sheet of paper measures roughly 115 x 85cm, apart from the large print at the end of this selection, which is approximately 115x178cm.

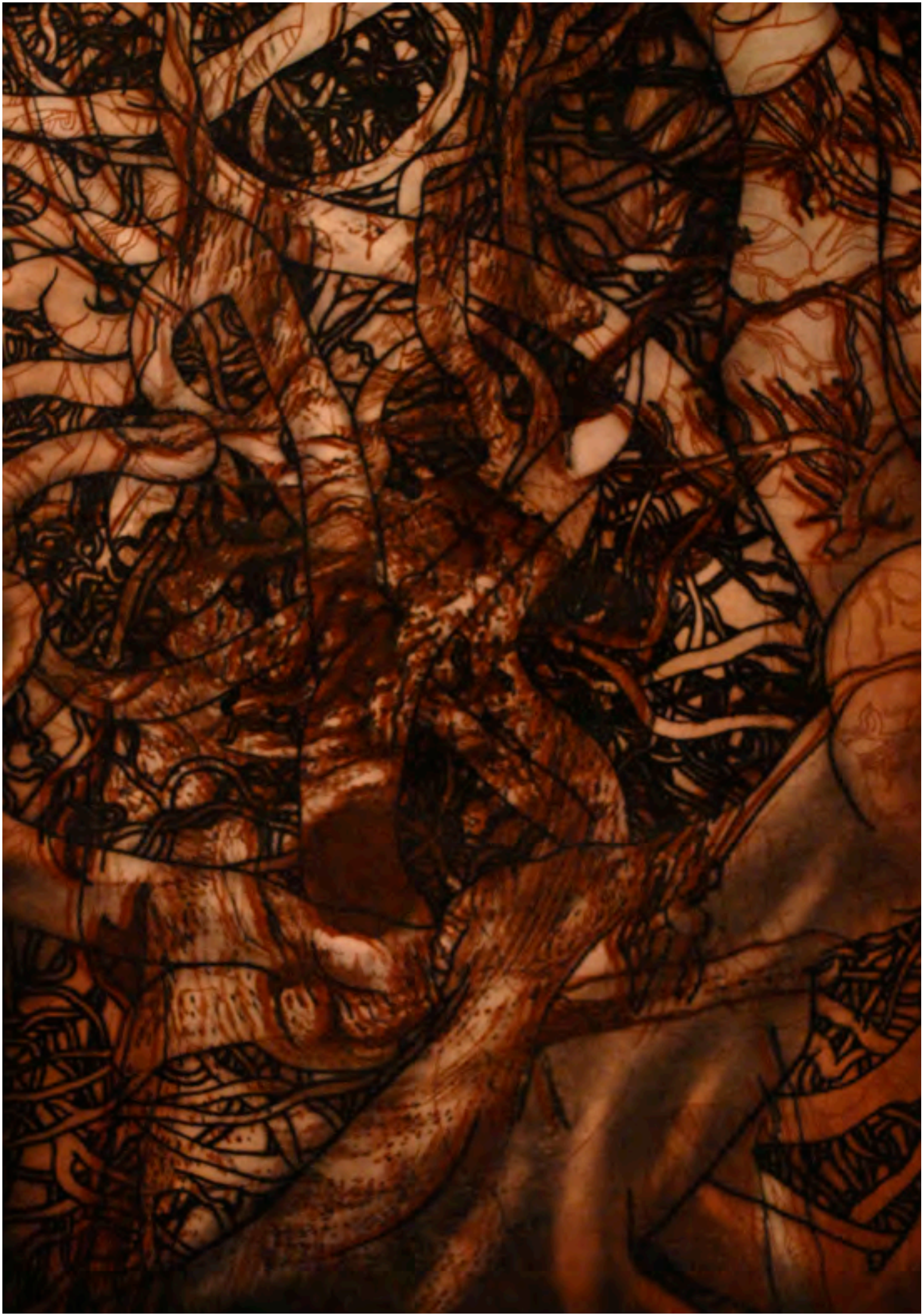
Damon Bird, *Gunnii prints in an installation in Devonport Regional Gallery*, 2009.











Damon Bird, *Gunnii,* Drypoint Etching, 115x178cm, 2012

Gustave Dore, *Spendthifts running through the wood of suicides (The Inferno, Canto 13)*, Etching, approx. 10x8inches, 1890.

Ink and Sweat

"King Billy's dead, Crowther has his head,
Stokell has his hands and feet.
My feet, my feet, my poor black feet,
That used to be so gritty,
They're not aboard the Runnymede
They're somewhere in this city."[154]

[154] Ditty from Old Hobart Town, circa 1869.

In the well known 14th century allegorical poem *Dante's Inferno*, the protagonist begins by entering the forest before being taken on a long protracted journey through the subterranean confines of hell, depicted as nine circles of suffering at various locations within the earth. Within the seventh circle Dante is led by the poet Virgil through the *Wood of Suicides*, where the disembodied souls of those who took their own lives have become that of the arboreal forms. Reminiscent of the cider gums, the trees' pained bloodletting is described by Dante:

> *"I stretched my hand a little forward and plucked a branchlet from a great thorn-bush, and its trunk cried out, "Why dost thou rend me?" When it had become dark with blood it began again to cry, "Why dost thou tear me? hast thou not any spirit of pity? Men we were, and now we are become stocks; truly thy hand ought to be more pitiful had we been the souls of serpents."*[155]

Metaphorically analogous to the *Inferno*, my journey through this research trajectory runs something of a similar gamut. Having begun with encountering the cider gums in the wide open country of the Central Plateau, and entering into this process of engagement, my trajectory ran a course back down the mountain and into the confines

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Pybus, Cassandra Jane. *Community of Thieves*. Port Melbourne : Heinemann Australia, 1991. p. 170.

[155] Excerpt from the seventh circle (Canto 13) of Dante's *Inferno*, in which Virgil leads Dante through the Wood of Suicides. See;
Alighieri, Dante. *The inferno of Dante: a new translation / by Robert Pinsky; illustrated by Michael Mazur*. London : J.M. Dent, 1996.

of a small windowless room in the bowels of the Tasmanian School of Art, a small, dark, cell-like and seemingly timeless void where I would compulsively create the printing plates of this thesis over a period extending on and off for over four years (six if you count the entirety of elapsed time).[156]

Another analogy is that of the bushranger Michael Howe, who found a place of solace in the mountains, before having his brains beaten out and his head put on public exhibition in Hobart Town circa 1818. The School of Art is built on top of Hunter Island after all, which was the sight of gibbeting the bodies (or heads as it were) of condemned convicts and bushrangers until public distaste in the sight of rotting corpses led to this being moved along to Queenborough in 1818.[157] My basement studio is positioned somewhere in the vicinity of this morbid sight of colonial grotesquery.[158] On my morning walks to the studio I would pass through St. David's Park where sometime in 1864 William Lanne was buried with the skull of an Englishman inserted into his head, and which lay discarded on the same grass that I walked on when his body was exhumed and abducted for black market dissection amongst the Royal Society.

When I return to the dark, windowless recesses of my basement studio, I take out a large sheet of aluminium and lay it out flat on the

[156] In these conditions I unfortunately developed an overwrought work practice that lead for a time to a deterioration of my health to the point where I was forced to take leave for much of 2010.
[157] See; Davis, Richard P. *The Tasmanian Gallows*. Hobart : Cat & Fiddle Press, 1974. p. 7.
[158] Two of Howe's companions, Hugh Burn, 22 and Richard McGuire, 23, were also hung and gibbeted at the Hunter Island sight. In years between 1806 and 1946, a total of 540 men and women were hung in Tasmania. See; Davis, Richard P. *The Tasmanian Gallows*. Hobart : Cat & Fiddle Press, 1974.

floor. I turn out the lights to project one of the source image slides[159] onto the wall and lay myself down on the cement to begin drawing on the metal plate with an ordinary permanent marker. This drawing stage may take weeks, months, or even years – time spent immersed in the strange dark world of the projector's soft glow. Along with the projector, I also use a second work light positioned beside the plate, casting light across it on an angle that serves to illuminate the area where I'm working without affecting the brightness and visibility of the projection on the wall.

In this way I draw until the base image is complete, and then I switch on the fluorescent lights, and continue to lie down on the floor to commence the etching/engraving stage of the plate's development. I use a small collection of tools – a cheap twenty dollar dot engraver from the hardware store[160], a medieval looking conglomeration of a tool consisting of a chisel with a dry point tool and various pieces of metal taped together[161], a modified wire brush, various pieces of sandpaper, and a burnisher/scraper.

Using a similar method to the drawing light when doing the guide drawing, I cast a light across the surface of the plate so that it catches the edge of the burr as I mark the plate; this allows me to

[159] From a small selection of slides culled from literally hundreds of images taken during the course of walking and exploring the Central Plateau –these are like my frozen 'eyes' from the past.
[160] I have blown up the motor on a good number of these during my research as the motor overheats, burns the hand, and eventually dies if you push it too hard – which I invariably do.
[161] Originally, this was put together to add extra weight to the dry-point tool, so that I could produce more downward pressure on the plate with less physical exertion (you wear out your hands pretty quickly working on these plates with normal tools), but came to utilize the various marks that could be obtained from its different edges.

see the shimmer of each score on the metal surface as I progress across the surface of the plate. With the variety of mark marking tools that I employ I am able to conjure up a variety of marks on the plate, from deep gouges, to soft scrapes, burred lines and fine scratches. In this way I etch the plate in a direct dry-point manner, that while time consuming, does not require the use of chemicals or acids. A standard 90 by 120cm plate, may take anywhere from one to three months to complete, depending on the level of detail. Some, which are larger combinations of plates up to a conjoined size of 180 x 120 cm may take longer – with one large plate in particular being worked on over the course of five years of my research.

Once the etching/engraving stage of the plate is complete, then it becomes like a stamper. It holds the static base graphic image, which will underpin each of the subsequent prints that are made from it, and will be the starting point, or conduit, for the new process that is embarked on in the print studio.

My creative process in the print studio is one of constant and ongoing experimentation within defined parameters. There is something alchemical about the process, which is essentially a good part of what was responsible for infecting me with the 'printmaking bug' back in 2001 when I pulled my first print. I have a kind of ritual to my process, whereby I am drawn into idiosyncratic and expressive state of mind where I become almost fevered in my immersion in the ink, the paper, and the press.

I start with the ‘clean hands’ job of tearing the paper into the right sized sheets that I need for a ‘bleed-print’ of my plates, which means that the paper will be slightly smaller than the plate, and that the print will have no border – the torn edges of the paper will be the edges of the print, something that in my mind makes it more like a historical artefact and singular object. To obtain the required size sheets of paper for my plates I have to buy my paper on a 120cm x 20-meter roll - it is the finest quality Hahnemuhle etching paper from Germany. The torn paper sheets are then immersed in a bath of water to soften while the ink and plates are prepared.

A good deal of time is spent preparing inks for each printing session. My inks are made up in an idiosyncratic mix of standard etching inks, oil paint, wax medium, transparent medium, base pigment, and various hard and soft oils. They are always variations of a group of select colour tones. After each printing session I collect the left over ink and scrap it back into a tin, and so at the beginning of each print session the basis for the new ink mixture is that which is left over from the previous session, and is then added to, with its colour/tone and consistency subsequently augmented and modified anew. At minimum I will prepare two colours (for a two plate print), but usually will prepare around four to six tones. The inks are mixed on glass plates with palette knives, and often will include elements that are made from scratch by grinding pure pigment into linseed oil with a glass hand muller. The inks need to be prepared to a particular balance of consistency that is difficult to explain, but is a middle ground between the right opacity and the right looseness/softness

versus the ‘grabby-ness’ of the oil. The ink is a crucial element to the affect of the printed image.

When the ink is ready, it is scooped up and applied to the plate with a flat plastic applicator, and spread evenly over the entire surface of the plate. Then the ink is dabbed, quite forcibly over the entire surface of the plate – the dabber is rocked, rolled and shuffled until there is the assurance that every inch of the printing surface has had the ink squished down into the farthest recesses of its scraped and mottled surfaces. At this point it is time to switch to wiping.

Wiping begins with scrunched up handfuls of coarse open weave tarlatan cloth which is used to remove much of the thick layering of ink on the plates surface, wiping it back to a manageable level of ink where the graphic image begins to be visible through the inks surface, at which point tarlatan is replaced with torn out pages of the phone book for the more subtle stages of wiping. At this point in my process, my method becomes a painterly manipulation of the plate tone[162].

In the traditional printing method, the plate tone of an etching plate is wiped down to the bare minimum; it is essentially an unwanted artefact of the printing process. The tonal makeup of a plate and its printed equivalent would reside almost entirely in the established drawn marks and textures worked into the plates surface, and by and large it would be desirable to transfer a clean print of these marks, and the imagery that they make up, onto the paper. This is where I

[162] Plate tone is the residual surface tone left on the plate from the initial ink application, which in the traditional printing technique of etchings is usually almost completely removed.

deviate largely from tradition, as at this point, the marks on the plate become a solid base for over which a layer of floating, atmospheric ink can be painstakingly manipulated and subtly wiped to produce a wide variety of tonal effects – which is to say, it takes on the characteristics of a mono-print/dry-point etching hybrid.

I usually spend around an hour wiping each 90x120cm plate before it is ready to print, and at a minimum use two separate plates per print (and sometimes up to six). The way that I wipe the ink on the plates surface, is in a way similar to something like the technique employed by Sidney Nolan in his desert series – where paint was applied to a slick Masonite surface and then scraped away to produce the various tones and landscape contours. I do a fair proportion of the tonal wiping with the newsprint by simply concentrating pressure and direction in the desired areas, before pulling a soft rag tight over my index finger and subtly going over surface of the plate wiping in highlights and tonal textures. At the very end of the spectrum I also remove my gloves and use the edge of the palm of my hand for very soft final touch wiping. The overall affect of this wiping is to create a sort of spotlight effect on the image (reminiscent of the projector bulb, and the head torch). It is like applying light and shadow to the base graphic image, and it almost creates the effect of the print containing its own internal light source. In this way, the base image on the plate becomes the solid, fixed structure, while the ink takes on the role of an ephemeral element, always shifting and changing on the plate's surface.

When I have prepared at least two plates, I put one on the press, blot the paper, and run each through onto the paper in quick succession. Depending on how satisfied I am with the print, I may either leave it at that or apply additional layers, or even paint onto the paper directly with ink before rolling it back through the press to remove excess ink.

Shed Printing and the Mojo-pin

In the beginning of 2012 I packed up my belongings and moved back to the countryside. Not to Caveside, where I grew up, but to the Huon Valley in the South. Renting an old dilapidated apple shed and small cabin from a farmer in the hills behind Franklin on the edge of the great southern forestry stronghold, I nicknamed the place 'New Walden', and began going about my work in a much more primitive, isolated and peaceful setting; far from the incessant hum of the city surrounds. This has proved to be a good decision in terms of productivity and focus, but has also lead to another series of challenges in terms of the process of making prints.

In the shed I have had the freedom to spread out in a large space, and the rough and tumble environment suits me well – it's the same kind of dirty farm shed that we have on the farm at Caveside; the kind I grew up working in on various projects. At first I just assumed that in the absence of a press in this work space, I would mainly be working on my metal plates, and treating my paper – but a lingering ulterior motive was an exploration of what ways I could make do with

what I had, and print without a press[163]. The main catalyst for this was having the large plate that took from 2007 to early 2012 to complete, and I was loathe to the idea of having to cut the thing in half as I had with other larger plates, to fit it through the large press at the art school - after all the time spent in making it, I just couldn't bring myself to do it.

I experimented with plaster printing first: the method of obtaining an intaglio print by wiping the ink on the plate as normal, but then casting the surface with plaster, having first made a wooden mould to surround the plate to hold the plaster. It's a process loosely related to fresco painting, in that as the plaster dries it absorbs the pigment fully into the surface, producing a surprisingly accurate reproduction of the inked plate. The catch is that the finished print is both cumbersome in size and weight, and fragile. But beyond this, the prints have a certain pleasing quality, with both the process and result being somewhat reminiscent, to my mind, of those grotesque plaster casts of contorted bodies pulled from the ashes of Vesuvius; the print becomes somewhat sculptural. I'll no doubt pursue this process further in the future, but for the size of the plates I had in mind, it wasn't going to be a practical means to print anything huge.

Concurrently I had found a large, round, and very solid tubular piece of wood in the shed. Weighing a ton, and barely able to be lifted, I christened this the 'Mojo-pin', thinking it would be perfect for printing with. I purchased the largest and thickest piece of plywood available to

[163] Taking inspiration from groups like Cannonball Press in the USA, who hold workshops printing with such things as industrial road rollers, and rocking horses mounted with a curved metal base.

use as a printing bed, and laid it out on the cement floor of the shed to form a primitive wooden press comprised of the basic elements of roller and bed.

One of the ongoing problems that I was having with my prints up until this point was the 'cleanness' of the image. I was always searching for something slightly more expressive, more tonally variable, and more raw and primitive. Hand printing is the obvious solution to this, but traditionally it's more something used in the realms of relief printing, rather than intaglio. I made a couple of woodcut blocks to the same dimensions as my metal plates at this point, as woodcut lends itself naturally an expressionist bent, and set about using them as a combined layer with the intaglio prints. But it was really a desire to bring a kind of brute expressivity to the intaglio plates themselves that inspired me to try print them by hand – despite all my research in the area seeming to indicating a general consensus on the impossibility of doing so.

Initial experiments with the Mojo-pin were crude and not altogether satisfactory, but the breakthrough came with the discovery that paper soaked for much longer than is normally required lends itself to a workable malleability in this application, and when the Mojo-pin was combined with other pressure sources – such as the back of a shovel, a old broad farm hoe, a large tablespoon and a round stone – then

Damon Bird, *Shed Studio*. 2012.

Damon Bird, *Mojo-pin/press bed*. 2012.

interesting results could be achieved.[164] It is a protracted, labour-intensive, and downright exhausting way to print, yet yields qualities that couldn't be achieved any other way – and surprisingly there seems to be a greater gain in the illusion of depth in the results, along with a stronger transfer of the kind of extensive mono-print wiping that I imbue my plates with. This would seem to be due to the much higher levels of sheer combined pressure that the paper is subjected to as it is wrought over multiple times over a long period of time with various implements.

Of course, there is also an inherent crudeness to printing in this way, and I have enjoyed pushing a certain level of degradation into the images. I have used handfuls of hay as part of the wiping process, and walk around and lay on the back of the paper as I work it to the plate, using a newspaper layer (no blanket) to counter the friction of the tools I employ, which also becomes imprinted to the back of the paper along with shed dirt, and other indentations and pockmarks. It is also not uncommon for the paper to become stressed to the point of tearing, or to stick to plate where it has received pressure to the point of disintegration - all of which I revel in as the print becomes an artifact of the process; eroded and hovering on the verge of ruin.

And so in this way I have been able to print outside of the limited size constraints of the etching press, in a very direct and expressive manner, with the only limitation being one's physical capacity to continue, and the time limit of the ink eventually drying on the plate. The largest plate printed in this way yielded an unbroken print of

[164] In my treatment of the paper I have also at times utilized acacia bark in the water bath, such as is used in the tanning of animal skins.

115x178 cm, which to my knowledge is outside of the limitations of any etching press in the country at this time, and certainly in Tasmania.[165]

[165] This took an entire day to print and resulted in complete exhaustion, and hands covered in blisters.

Chapter 6. Concluding Thoughts

The wind howls over the bristling moorland, and emits a constant strained whooshing through the leaves of the snow gums and rattles the tin roof of the hut against the loose nails that hold it.

The sky clings to a dawn-like yolk of brooding dirty gun-metal grey throughout the day, as a yellow light glows ominously on the horizon to the west, and the clouds pummel and churn slowly over the jumbled rocks splayed from the gravelly earth like enormous broken teeth upon the hillside.

A solitary Wedge-tailed Eagle glides low encircling the edges of the Liawenee Canal, the surviving half of a pairing that ended entangled in the high-voltage power-lines, so monstrous in size that its proximity would inspire true and awe and fear in equal measures. Scraps of ancient boot leather amid empty bottles and rusted tin cans litter the vicinity, while faded old black and white magazine and newspaper cut-outs of pin-up girls and movie stars of a bygone era continue to slowly curl up their dog-eared corners and wither with the wallpaper under the filtered light of dilapidated shepherd's hut windows.

The world turns on its axis slowly, but on the plateau, time moves without any great urgency.

Richard Flanagan once said that "*there are a series of responses to Tasmania; one is to present it as a Gothic horror land, and the other is to present it as this Utopia. But nobody wants to look at truths*

that might be more complex. And everybody's after a little box to put the place into, rather than to accept that it's a large and moving mystery. And they ought to try and come to terms with some of the tensions that make that mystery, to me, so interesting."[166]And it is with a part of this great moving mystery, which is in turn Gothic, Utopian, and Baroquely rich in equal measure, that my work engages.

The Cider Gum trees may disappear completely from their native home along the frost hollows and banks of the Great Lake, and the arboreal skeletons that I have drawn this research from will no doubt collapse and decay into the soil and be disintegrated. While their offspring may be artificially germinated from seed-stocks and live to grow in ordered European ornamental gardens on the opposite side of the globe, they will share nothing of the formal character that has made these trees so aesthetically interesting to me, which have grown twisted and weathered by the harsh sub-alpine conditions of the Plateau.

The Lakes area will probably continue much as it operates at the moment, with a slowly growing bush-land shack suburbia occupied mainly on weekends by those wanting to hunt, fish, or just relax and do nothing in a quiet place. The small group of permanent residents will no doubt continue to carry out their work, record the weather, tend to the overseeing of the National Parks, police the roads, quarry gravel from hillsides, serve beer at the local pub, release and monitor

[166] Hugo, Gilles. 'Richard Flanagan: The Making of a Tasmanian Best-Seller'. *The Write Stuff* website. Accessed November 21st, 2012, http://www.the-write-stuff.com.au/archives/vol-1/interviews/flanagan.html

trout for recreational anglers, and pump fuel for those passing through with the seasons.

There is a fairly limited human economy to Plateau now, far from city centres and the agricultural fertility of the lowlands. The resources that once made it so rich for cultures past hold little value for the contemporary world. The usurped land lies now sleeping below the veneer of the commonly perceived, with its past identity slowly digested into that of the usurpers. Cultural heritage rings out as gunshots reverberating over the flatlands, as groups of hounds maw the air with the urgent heavy barking of deranged seals. Meanwhile, World Heritage Area protection status ironically lends a hand in eroding the ecological balance through an enforced cessation of the maintenance of this fire shaped landscape.

Global warming may yet see far greater changes to this environment, and if the loss of the Cider Gum is any indication; the most specialised and unique species stand as the most vulnerable. The prospect of the narrowing of ecological versatility in an already sparse countryside is a dry and grating prospect to ponder. But this is sadly one of the inevitable tolls that the environment takes in the wake of human progress, in a myriad of situations the world over.

What conclusions should an artist draw from investigating such a place? While there would seem to be a blurred and indefinite line between the actual subject and that which is represented of it in the two dimensional realm of an etching on a wall, one could only really surmise that the pictures created are as much a representation of the

artist's mindset as they are the country depicted – as broad abstractions of the land that I find myself reflected in, they become self portraits. It may be that the work's value is simply that of a singular Tasmanian experience, but at its best I would hope it represents something of a greater truth of and about the culture that I come from, and the hidden layers to the country on which we dwell. It will remain obscure to a point, and without a forgone conclusion, but if it the work operates only to encourage consideration of these things on a deeper level, then it succeeds on some level.

In the end, the kind of art that I create is generated as a poetic response to being in place. It perhaps should best be read in terms of elegy - where while there may be death involved, there is also the celebration of richness – an honouring of the baroque opulence of form and narrative played out before the senses; and the sense of wonder that that entails. The journey of discovery has been one of enrichment - to the greater understanding of the subject, and to the growth of my ability to grapple with and translate through the artistic medium of printmaking within which this research has taken place.

The story is circular, and broken, and as Richard Flanagan put it, a "*large moving mystery*"[167] which may well reveal something of its fragmentary truth in the imagination of the inquisitive beholder. A central theme is that of an anthropomorphic representation of natural forms as being symbolic of what I would describe as a base interconnectivity and fundamental interrelation between all living things

[167] Hugo, Gilles. 'Richard Flanagan: The Making of a Tasmanian Best-Seller'. *The Write Stuff* website. Accessed November 21st, 2012, http://www.the-write-stuff.com.au/archives/vol-1/interviews/flanagan.html

in the natural world. The science of ecology tells us that all things link within a symbiotic web on interconnectivity; this idea has been furthered by James Lovelock to propose that the entire planet that we live on can be for all intents and purposes be considered one combined organism made up of the sum of its parts. Needless to say, it is an inherent truth that humanity is also a part of nature, in origin at least.

This idea obviously isn't altogether new, yet it is one worth looking at in light of the current situation in which we collectively find ourselves (certainly in in terms of the potentially nasty ecological situation the planet now faces). Natural disaster has become a very real and dangerous part of contemporary life the world over. With tsunamis, floods and earthquakes wreaking havoc with seemingly greater frequency than in living memory, it would seem that the citizens of the world are now a lot more willing to take the idea that human industry has carried on to the point where we may have destabilized the ecological systems that support us.

Understandings imposed by the dominant religious doctrines of Eurocentric culture, whether or not you choose to follow them, are an all-pervasive aspect of our culture and history, within which the dominion of nature is a fundamental premise. At the very root of this traditional doctrine is a particular way of seeing nature. If one were to consult the texts of Catholicism as to what the natural environment is actually there for, the resulting answer clearly stated in Genesis is perfectly clear – the natural environment exists for the benefit and exploitation of mankind.

It's hard to understand how we got to the point of such cultural arrogance, when if we examine the origins of our culture, we will find that some of the earliest religious cults had belief systems based around the interconnectivity between man and nature. Our earliest culture came out of nature, and reflected an interdependent way of being within the world. We accepted fully that we were part of nature and actively worshipped the symbols of nature's booty.

A symbol to emerge from just about every culture and religion, from the earliest of times, the world over, is the Tree of Life. Conceptually, the symbolism of the Tree of Life illustrates the simple notion that all life on earth is related. It has developed into a universal symbol employed by science, religion, philosophy and mythology, and a reoccurring motif in the theological art of many cultures. In its simplest form it alludes to the interconnectedness of all life on earth, and functions as a metaphor for common evolutionary descent. The Tree of Life connects all forms of creation in much the same way as a family tree illustrates the lines of family lineage. The Cider Gums of the Central Plateau are one such Tree of Life. In the gnarled protuberances of a uniquely Vandiemonian sensibility, they are a fading reminder of the value of a rich and integral kinship with place to the vitality of culture.

When I began this research trajectory I started by asking two deceptively simple questions:

1. Can the experience of place be altered by the knowledge of history?

2. Can the experience of place in light of this historiographical knowledge be successfully transferred into the work of art?

The answer to both of these questions has proved to be that it can, but through the trajectory of this research is has been possible for my working practice to develop beyond this initial starting point. It is now my understanding that it is in the essence of the engagement with the nature of place, and the elegiac nature of the personal experience within that engagement, that the heart of this research lays. This has taken the originally unforeseen course of specific and detailed investigation into the endemic Cider Gum tree as a key cultural symbol, and the exploration has grown all the richer for it.

Through this writing I have detailed the extent to which the Cider Gum tree is situated at the heart of the *place* that is the Central Plateau, and that the place itself is entwined with a rich *cultural landscape*, that within which, the Cider Gum tree can be reclaimed imaginatively and understood as a potent cultural ruin. Throughout these investigations I have wrung these ideas out through the development of prints that I feel have successfully portrayed my subject, transposed through a distinctly elegiac poetic expression verging on allegory – whereby the trees have come to represent not just trees, but a potent totem embedded with the invisible narrative woven between self and place, both personally, and as played out in the Central Plateau's varied and tumultuous history.

While there have been some minor failings of the research trajectory in what could be termed 'false starts' in the areas of video, digital

imaging, and painting, in the overall arc of the research trajectory these unresolved explorations remain necessary stepping stones on the path to accomplishing what has been achieved purely through printmaking.

In this realm, I hope that my work can be seen as a significant contribution to the development of an enlarged awareness of this unique tree and its standing within the cultural lexicon of both Tasmanian environmental history and contemporary art. I believe that I have plumbed the depths of known human history surrounding the tree within the literary historical record, and hope to have instilled a good degree of this acquired breadth of awareness and experience successfully into the work. The collated historical documentation, and writing about the tree on a cultural level contained in this exegesis probably represents a more detailed account of this particular subject than can be found in any other single source.[168] And within the milieu of Tasmanian art, and the international field of printmaking, I feel that I have highlighted a reasonably unique and specific subject matter, and a degree of expansion in aesthetic qualities, scale and technique that I believe makes an individual and idiosyncratic contribution to the ever-broadening field within which my work sits.

[168] The tree has been the subject of numerous detailed botanical studies in the field of environmental science, and certainly reports in the interest preservation – but outside of this kind of literature, it seems to have almost been relegated to a minor footnote in local history.

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